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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Voices in my Head: A Reader's Reflections on Works by Gunnars, Penelope and Rich

by

Candace M. Bamber

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Edmonton, Alberta
Spring 1993

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Friday, December 4, 1992.

Abstract

The relationship between myself, the text I read and the text I write is problematic. It seems simple enough on the outside. I read, I think about what I have read, I write about what I have thought. I've been taught the "correct" way to write critical and scholarly discourses. But Julia Penelope suggests that this discourse of the academy, the discourse in which I "correctly" try to write when I am writing about what I have read, is patriarchal in character and reflects the way men think; because women do not think this way, they are unilaterally silenced within this discourse. Hélène Cixous offers a solution: that the multiplicity of the female body must be extended into the female text. I decide to apply Cixous' idea to literary criticism—I have a thousand voices in my head all clamoring for the opportunity to be heard.

Adrienne Rich said that good literature, rather than "wrapping something up," "explodes the possibilities." I feel challenged, intrigued by Rich's statement. I see in these "possibilities" a different way of entering the discourse of literary criticism: a way that is neither interpretive nor descriptive. I see a way of integrating Cixous' call for multiplicity with Rich's call to explode the possibilities. So I have written about three books: *The Prowler*, By Kristjana Gunnars; *Speaking Freely: Unlearning the Lies of the Father's Tongue*, by Julia Penelope; and *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, by Adrienne Rich. In my writing, I have explored the ideas of voice and silence, oppression and freedom, internal and external geographies, and the need to be who I am, even while I'm being a critic. My reactions to *Prowler*, *Speaking Freely* and *Atlas* are what Rich and Cixous call for: my many voices telling a next story, a next argument, a next poem in a succession. As I write my stories, I hope someone else will write after me, and that their stories inspire the next.

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introduction

With the writer of bliss (and his reader) begins the untenable text, the impossible text. This text is outside pleasure, outside criticism, unless it is reached by another text of bliss; you cannot speak on such a text, you can only speak in it, in its fashion, enter into a desperate plagiarism, hysterically affirm the void of void.

Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

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Sometimes, I feel overwhelmed by voices. They circle around and around in my head—echoing each other, disagreeing, arguing, whispering, shouting. They belong to different people, these voices: to Adrienne Rich, Julia Penelope and Kristjana Gunnars, of course—their work is one of the objects of this study. But there are other voices as well: the voices of Albert Gelpi, Claire Keyes, Dick Howard, my mother, Kay Stewart, David Bleich, Roland Barthes, my mother, grandma, sisters, my classmates, primary school teachers, ancient Scandinavian poets, Stephen Hawking, Albert Einstein, Shrödinger, of course… and others. Others. All have their say. At the same time, all the voices are mine.

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The relationship between myself, the text I read and the text I write is problematic. It seems simple enough on the outside. I read, I think about what I have read, I write about what I have thought.

It isn't my intention to develop a theory of reading and writing, but such issues invariably arise for me, at least in passing. Nor do I intend to write a review of other people's theories. Some of the voices in my head belong to these theorists, and I will express their voices-that-are-mine, but it is the expression of their voices rather than a review of their theories that is important here.

For me, opening a book is like entering a different reality. I have been reading some of the "leading" theorists on the subject of reading, trying to understand where I go and how I get there. I have always been dissatisfied with the discourses of literary theory, and after much thought, I finally understand why: they don't describe the way I read.

I assumed I was a freak of nature, an abnormal reader—but an informal poll of

colleagues and friends has convinced me that I am far from the only person on the planet who reads the way I do. Quite simply, when I read, THE TEXT DOES NOT EXIST.

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THE TEXT DOES NOT EXIST is perhaps a statement that requires some elucidation. I know of no scientific reason why it should be so, so I'll simply describe how the text disappears.

When I first pick up a book, it, and I, occupy the same physical plane. It is an object I can hold in my hands—my senses respond to it, its colour, its texture, its smell. If I open it, there are pages covered with letters and words. I usually read lying down, so I arrange my pillows, pull an afghan over my toes. Then I look at the book—I read the cover, the fly leaf. If there is an introduction or an afterword, I read that, and then I read the table of contents. The ritual seems to focus and prepare my mind (consciousness? unconscious?) to leave the text behind, as though acknowledging it fully makes it possible to dismiss it thereafter.

Reading itself is rather like sleeping in some ways. As though I were falling asleep, when I first begin to read, I vaguely notice the first two or three pages in the outward reality I share with the book. Then there is only the dream.

In the dream world, there is no text. There is no book. My consciousness is not in physical contact with the physical world of the volume; my senses disengage from the outer world and turn inward. There is certainly experience—but all in this place where the consciousness goes. External reality fades utterly. If someone calls my name or the telephone rings, I am startled out of the dream—I become aware that there is a book in my hands, that my hands turn the pages.

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I'm not a reductionist—I was going to say "at heart," but I realize it isn't true. I'm not a reductionist anywhere. Every day I watch *Star Trek: The Next Generation*—it's my favourite TV show, and really, the only one I watch regularly. On one particular episode, a non-organic life form referred to humans as "ugly bags of mostly water." This is an undeniably true statement, but I think that most people would agree, there is something happening in human and other life forms that makes them more than simply the sum of their chemical components. There is something, perhaps that which we call *soul*, that animates this ugly bag of mostly water.

But what does this have to do with reading? Mostly, it's an analogy. Like the scientist who identifies and measures all the elements that compose a human body, but still has no idea what really makes it all go, the literary theorist looks at the elements of reading without really understanding how reading works. Why does the physical world disappear? How is the text involved in the process? Is "language" the only medium through which this suspension can occur?

I have no answers — I wish I did. I do have experience, however, and I think perhaps that a close analysis of that experience might shed some light on the whole problem.

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Then there's writing. I've been taught the correct way to write critical and scholarly discourses. Julia Penelope and others claim that this pseudo-objective discourse of the academy is patriarchal in character and reflects the way men (want to?) think; because women do not think this way, they are unilaterally silenced within this discourse. How does a woman get her voice back? Cixous suggests that the multiplicity of the female body must be extended into the female text and I must admit, I find myself much more

comfortable in this paradigm. I have so many voices in my head, all clamoring for expression. All my female voices must be silenced when I choose to write in the "masculine" mode.

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And then there's the issue of subjectivity (real or imagined) in writing. Hélène Cixous wrote:

> *Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.*
>
> (Cixous 225)

Adrienne Rich wrote:

> *Remember that most education will be self education, in learning things women need to know and in calling up the voices we need to hear within ourselves.*
>
> (What does a woman need to know? 10)

✠✠✠

I am finding this impossible. I am supposed to be writing an introduction to three related pieces of my own writing. Writing about them is even harder than writing them in the first place. First of all, I am overwhelmed by my desire to take a definitive stance about what I have written, and to explain it all to the reader. That is, after all, what many introductions do. But one of the many things the writing itself is about is that definitive stances aren't *really* definitive. I suspect that trying to take a definitive stance might do irreparable damage to my argument, although I can certainly understand what is so attractive about the whole notion (taking a definitive stance, not ruining my argument). Still, it seems to me that a little bit of orientation regarding my

text is nevertheless in order. There are three books: *The Prowler*, by Kristjana Gunnars; *Speaking Freely: Unlearning the Lies of the Fathers' Tongue*, by Julia Penelope; and *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, by Adrienne Rich. They are quite different from each other in that one is fiction, one non-fiction and one poetry. They are similar in that they touch on many of the same themes. The themes that were important to me are voice and silence, oppression and freedom, and internal and external geographies. Anyway, I read these three books. Along with them, I read a large number of other books, some related, some not—the ones that were sufficiently interesting to stay in my thoughts long enough to be included in my text, whether as paraphrase, direct dialogue, or simple intellectual pollution are listed in the section called "Influential Readings."

So what am I writing? Adrienne Rich wrote something directly to the point:

> *I still think you can say something is a good poem or not. That's different, because there are so many things that happen in a good poem. There's sound and rhythm and language used in an original way. And finally, I would think that a really good poem opens up a possibility for other poems rather than being the end of a succession of things. Instead of wrapping something up, it explodes the possibilities.*
>
> ("Three Conversations" 117)

I feel challenged, intrigued by Rich's statement, that good literature opens up possibilities. I see in these possibilities a different way of entering the discourse of literary criticism: a way that is neither interpretive nor descriptive. I don't know what to call this "different way"; the definitions I have to offer are somewhat vague and the words imprecise. What I have tried to do is enter my whole self (not just myself-the-critic) into the spirit, the moment, of a story, and then write about being there, about the story's effects on my psyche, about who I become while I am in the story. My reactions

to *Prowler*, *Speaking Freely* and *Atlas* are what Rich calls for: a next story, a next argument, a next poem in a succession. As I write my stories, I hope that someone else will write after me, and that their stories inspire the next.

✠✠✠

Have I said anything about books? I have read thousands of books, some wonderful, some terrible—most in between, neither brilliant nor abominable. *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Fionavar Tapestry*, *Star Trek*, *The Chronicles of Hawklan* and *The Wheel of Time*. Fantasy is my favourite, and science fiction—this is not something normally admitted in "scholarly" circles. The man who directed my honours thesis called this my "literary vice" and advised me to keep it to myself. But I am attracted to the balance between good and evil, and by the optimism, the fundamental belief in the inherent heroic goodness of the human-faced-by-true-evil. This is something I need to know about, something I have wished for in myself. I have seen much evil, and I did not stare it down or face it out. I compromised.

I wonder why I have this need to reconstruct myself as someone else. "Pure escapism!" is a true answer, and yet one too simplistic. Dissatisfaction with the way I am currently constructed in "reality" is also part of it, but not a major part.

A change in perspective yields an answer with more possibilities. I don't reconstruct myself into the characters in the book, I reconstruct the book people into me. They become who I am. They don't just take on my world view, my thoughts become their thoughts, my experience theirs. But I am uncomfortable with this notion. Perhaps I am still too close to Adrienne, Julia and Kristjana to admit they are me too—that I invented them and they became me.

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Adrienne. Julia. Kristjana. Made, as it were, not grown. What about Candace? Is the self I make on paper any more real than the Adrienne, the Julia, the Kristjana I make on paper? I have said I make them into me. Does this mean that when I read what I have written about myself I remake the self I read about into me too? (This is giving me a headache.)

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Since I am writing about my own experiences from my own point of view, I am clearly the person who best knows what is going on. Nevertheless, I have this burning need to apologize for making myself the authority. I have told myself over and over that it is not only OK, but necessary for me to have a voice and for me to use it. But the knot in my stomach persists, and it isn't bad fish. I feel almost as though I've been caught with my hand in someone's pocket, like I'm going to be punished for taking something that doesn't belong to me. When I find the reasons, the oppressions that lead to this fear, I find that they comfort the intellect and do little to help the nausea.

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I remember distinctly learning to read—or, at least I remember the first thing I ever read and learned something from. It was in 1969. I was almost four. I know that I knew about written language before then because I remember playing the reading game with my gramma. She would write about twenty words on yellow construction paper — and not baby words either; words like *river, geography, ashtree, crevasse, wolves, portrait* and so forth. She would show me each word, and tell me its meaning if I didn't know already. Then she would go into her bedroom and hide the cards. When she came out,

she would send me to look for the card with a specific word on it. While I was searching for the appropriate card, she would accomplish whatever she had planned to accomplish that day without me underfoot, and with me sufficiently occupied that she didn't have to wonder what I was doing to her house. When I found the card with the right word on it, I would take it to her and she would tell me to find another word.

The first thing I remember reading was the *TV Guide*. It was the issue that described the coverage of Apollo Eleven. It was the first time I ever associated the written word with information. We were at my Nana's cottage at Lake Dalrymple near Orillia, Ontario for a holiday. I asked so many questions about going to the moon that they let me stay up very late to watch the live coverage on TV—the blast off one night, and then the space walk a day or two later.

This was one of the pivotal experiences of my life—and I say that at age twenty-five, much in the same way, I have no doubt, I would have said it at three and a half. My world view expanded in a way I cannot describe. Since then, I always associate reading with being able to go to the moon.

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I think about the critical voice, the scholarly voice. This is, perhaps, the little voice in my head that is telling me that this project I'm undertaking is self-indulgent, soft-minded, inferior scholarship. Many things frighten me, and this little voice is one of the most frightening. It is the voice of self-doubt.

The voice of self-doubt is a gift from the abusers of my childhood. *Not good enough... too stupid...You!?... stop babbling... stop asking questions... this is the only thing you'll ever be good for... slut!... shut up... shut up!... SHUT UP!!.*

Whenever I write, or try to write a so-called "scholarly" discourse, the little voice starts in—doing what it always did—silencing me. When I was an undergraduate, I learned, by necessity, to write through it. I suffered from terrible writer's block 100% of the school year for four straight years.

The little voice, as I said, silences me. It tells me to "shut up." This, it seems to me, is also what so-called academic discourse does. It does not allow me to express what I see. But I don't believe that the discourse maliciously sets out to silence me. This isn't a personal vendetta. Over the last year or so, I think I've begun to understand what may be the nature of the problem. Analytical discourses are highly structured. My mind is also highly structured. The problem is that my mind is not structured the same way as analytical discourses are. These discourses are linear, logical and somewhat reductionist. My thinking is rather like a helix with shoots growing off it, floating through a space crammed with idea-blobs that occasionally get close enough to get hooked on. Despite all the training I have received that was specifically designed to get me thinking linearly, I still don't. I have more or less learned to *pretend* that I can so I can write the essays I have to write, but I am not particularly good at it, and I find it incredibly frustrating. Because the possibilities have opened up, I have chosen to write in a way that feels very comfortable, that reflects the way I think. I'm having a great time.

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And then there's feminism.

I never used to be a feminist. I thought that when you were good at something it was self-evident, and no-one could ever take that away from you.

I was wrong.

I discovered that when you are a woman, and you are good at something, someone else usually manages to take the credit. If you do get the credit yourself, everybody thinks that you must have "done something" sexual to get it. It isn't quite respectable for a woman to be so good at something that she gets public recognition for it.

I discovered how insidious sexism is.

Overt sexism wasn't permitted in our household, where I lived full-time from age 15 on. (Even if Dad had wanted to be an overt sexist, he was badly outnumbered). Neither of my parents is consciously sexist. In fact, when I was growing up, I was quite aware that my parents were much more aware of the issues, and much more liberal in their thinking than the parents of most of my little friends. I think having three daughters close together in age and no sons made both of my parents aware that for us to have a real chance for both material and social success, the world was going to have to change. Yet despite a genuine effort, both my parents have very deep-rooted assumptions about the world and a woman's appropriate place in it. Certainly the obvious stuff was recognized. For example, everybody helped with the domestic work, and Mom was alert enough to men's "tricks" that when Dad took over laundry and started shrinking angora sweaters, adding one red sock to the white load, and dissolving synthetics with the iron, she waited him out rather than taking back the chore because he couldn't do it as well as she could.

But once, I got into a discussion with my mother about whether my dad is sexist or not. My dad is a person whom I admire greatly, with many, many good qualities, and he is not one of those horrible male supremacist types. But he did something that made me angry—I can't remember what—and in response to whatever it was, I suggested to my mother that he was sexist. Her reply was telling: "What are you talking about?" she demanded in disgust. "Your father always let me work." I replied, "Maybe that's a real difference between your generation and mine, Mom—I never would have thought to ask his permission, and I would hope that my husband won't expect me to."

That conversation always played as subtext to other dialogues. Both my parents always told us, their three daughters: *You can be anything you want to be.* Although I don't remember being conscious of the subtext at the time, I was still affected by it. There is such truth in Adrienne Rich's statement from *Of Woman Born*:

> *The double messages need to be disentangled. "You can be anything you want to be" is a half-truth, whatever a woman's class or economic advantages. We need to be very clear about the missing portion, rather than whisper the fearful subliminal message: "Don't go too far."*
>
> *(248)*

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My reading did not turn out as I expected. What I did expect was that I would produce some post-modern deconstructionist drivel that highlighted the meaninglessness of the universe. I expected to write an answer to the texts in question. I expected to hypothesize, analyze and draw conclusions—to interpret, to understand.

Fortunately, none of these things happened. Instead, *Speaking Freely* offended me, so I began an experiment. I was convinced, despite Penelope's arguments to the contrary, that there was a voice I could speak in that was not meaningless, yet was not in "men's" language either. I kept a detailed reading journal that recorded my thoughts, feelings and connections as I read the book.

Since I was the only one who would see this journal, I felt free to be completely honest. I didn't expect my own honesty to become an issue. I didn't realize when I started that the best I was going to be able to do was reconstruct part of myself . By definition, a reconstruction is not the original. Truth became immediately problematic.

The best part is: truth, like understanding, is subject to change without notice.

I wrote the section in response to *The Prowler* in December of 1989 for a course I was taking in Canadian Literature and Reader Response Criticism. I revised it in August of 1992, adding something I had also written back in '89. The hard part was keeping myself from revising everything according to my current truth. I wrote the part about *Speaking Freely* in Fall 1991. In the year between there had been so many changes in me—so many changes in my thinking—that it never occurred to me that the two pieces could be in any way related.

The Adrienne Rich section seems the least personal, yet it was in writing this section that I learned the most about myself and my voice. I learned that I was the product of a social environment as well as a private one. And writing it the summer of 1992 I realize that though I have moved forward in so many ways, nothing can really change where I came from.

When I put the three essays side by side I am shocked by their coherence, by how well they stand together. I am the unifying metaphor, though it was never my intention to tell any of my own stories.

Yet what else is reading but telling our own stories?

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Roland Barthes said *The more a story is told in a proper, well spoken, straight forward way, in an even tone, the easier it is to blacken it, to read it inside out. This reversal, being a pure production, wonderfully develops the pleasure of the text.*

A text "right side out" is like a fairisle sweater—the colours form shapes, the stitches

are even, meshed. It makes sense, looks polished, complete. All parts are in place and the pattern is coherent. Turning text inside out is like turning such a sweater inside out. The ends of the yarn hang out, the knots, the unwoven threads. The pattern is vague, and all the seams show. There is a muted, patchwork quality to the colours. The fibre is worn and slightly nappy from rubbing against one's skin.

Critical discourse is like the sweater. The expert scholarly writer knits together the patterns and exposes them, seamlessly, brightly coherent, to the reader.

I intended all along to say that I was attempting to turn the three texts I have brought under study inside out—to show their disjointed undersides, but I realize now this is not the case. What I have done instead is turn my own critical discourse inside out. Everything that wouldn't have normally been seen in a so-called scholarly article is seen here—the thought processes, the associations, the personal, subjective and opinionated. My many biases: all my unwoven-in threads, patches, seams; the underside of the pattern—muted, irregular, interrupted by knots, not always easily discernible.

Barthes is right—this process increases the pleasure of the text immensely.

✠✠✠

And then there's anger. I write about anger a lot. It's a theme that Kristjana, Julia and Adrienne all write about, too. In fact, this whole dialogue is more about anger than any other single thing.

Having said that, I go elsewhere for some very telling definitions. In her article "Me and My Shadow," Jane Tompkins wrote about Woman's Anger:

Why am I so angry?

My anger is partly the result of having … caved in to authority very early on. As a result I've built up a huge storehouse of hatred and resentment against people in authority (mostly male). Hatred and resentment and attraction.

Why should poor men be made the object of this old pent up anger? (Old anger is the best anger, the meanest, the truest, the most intense. Old anger is pure because it is dislocated from its source for so long, has had the chance to ferment, to feed itself for so many years, so that it is nothing but anger. All cause, all relation to the outside world, long since sloughed off, withered away. The rage that I feel inside me now is the distillation of forty-six years. It has had a long time to simmer, to harden, to become adamantine, a black slab that grows in the dark.)

Then she goes on to say:

I am attached to this rage. It is a source of identity for me. It is a motivator, an explainer, a justifier, a no-need-to-say-more greeter at the door. If I were to eradicate this anger somehow, what would I do?

But if you aren't angry, can you still act? Will you still care enough to write the letters, make the phone calls, attend the meetings?

Anger is the first emotion I can remember feeling. When I was a small child I was known for my perpetually solemn expression. It wasn't that I was unhappy. I wasn't anything. Even anger came later.

I've never been generally angry at "men." I've never felt that "feminist rage." But I do recognize that adamantine, grow in the night fury—it's just in my case (like that of many women) it didn't register as a problem caused by others. I didn't direct it toward

"society" or "men." Instead, I did something that I now recognize as being my first baby step toward being free of that rage. I took full responsibility; I directed it toward myself.

And when I decide to punish somebody, I don't fool around.

My rage expressed itself as self-destruction: drugs, alcohol, food, sex, compulsive overwork—a comprehensive self-abuse that words can't really do justice to. Erica Jong tried in *Every Woman's Blues*, but I found the book unsatisfactory in too many ways to draw direct comparisons. Anyway, in the midst of all the anger, I discovered I knew how to feel a second emotion: shame.

The anger and the shame stayed in me, burnt away my innards until only a shell of a woman was left. I looked like a woman, smelled like a woman, sounded like one, fucked like one. But I was much more like an inflatable girl, blown up with rage and shame.

Different people find peace and healing in different places.The first stop in my journey was a workshop called "Addiction and Sexual Abuse." It was an intensive, three-week, live-in program. I didn't want to go (who would?). My best friend dragged me, literally kicking and screaming.

As expected, once there, I found fellowship, support, a new perspective. But valuable as these things are, they aren't what saved me.

I also found a voice.

For the first time in my life people listened when I talked (and talked and talked). When I was finished they validated whatever it was that I had just expressed.

They listened. They believed.

If I hadn't taken my rage out on myself, I never would have abused myself until I needed such a program to save my life; I would never have gone to that first workshop, and I never would have had the opportunity to talk my rage away.

Not a chain of events I would have chosen—still, I wouldn't be where I am now if I hadn't been where I was then. And I like where I am now.

I didn't start writing until the anger was long gone—so perhaps I am equipped to give an answer to Jane's question about action.

I have a theory.

I concede that anger gives out a blast of courage from which it is often possible to act. Courage to act gives one power. But I think this power is a false power. Speaking out is great, but only if someone is listening. My experience has been, however, that the angry voice is immediately not listened to. Which of course makes the speaker even angrier. It may seem on the surface that action is being taken. But is the problem solved? Or does the action and the response it garners just work to generate more anger?

I began to understand my own personal power when I began to rid myself of my anger. First of all, my vision became a lot clearer. I became able to see—the red haze wasn't blocking my sight any more.

I was appalled to discover that reality may even be worse than I had originally anticipated.

But once the anger was basically gone, there was room for other reactions to the realities I didn't like—reactions like passion, conviction and caring. My amorality was replaced by a code of ethics. I got a social conscience. My hate was replaced by love.

My power comes from my conviction and my passion. It comes from my love. I'm actually able to accomplish things.

So what does all this have to do with writing?

Well, first, there's the problem of voice. If my voice isn't an angry voice and it isn't a man's voice, then what exactly is it? I conceive of the feminine voice as being something that isn't a masculine voice, yet is at the same time comprehensible.

Jane points out in "Me and My Shadow" that there is a public/private dichotomy, where value is placed on the public and where women are associated with the private. But this dichotomy seems to be imposed by a patriarchal boundary set. The sense that the voice of the personal is feminine comes from this tradition. Tradition isn't necessarily truth.

In a conversation with Albert Gelpi, Adrienne Rich also acknowledges the dichotomy, but can't offer more than a theoretical answer to the problem:

> *AG: The revolution starts in the psyche, then, and moves out.*
>
> *AR: No, what I'm saying is that feminism—women's consciousness—ultimately has to break down that dichotomy. Once you stop splitting inner and outer, you have to stop splitting all those other dichotomies, which I think proceed from that.*
>
> ("Three Conversations" 119)

We judge written and spoken language by a standard established by an elite of primarily white males—males who have power. But I also recognize that while men may have a different set of expectations put upon them by their role in our society than women do, in many cases their lives are not noticeably easier. They are often oppressed and silenced as well. I don't think white males are the issue. There is a discourse of the powerful, which everyone else is expected to emulate, regardless of who the powerful are. Yet this expectation is misleading: being able to emulate the discourse does not mean that the person who does so will become powerful. Members of marginalized groups remain members of those groups even when they learn to write and speak like those in power.

I am a little unclear about who, exactly, I mean when I refer to "the powerful," especially as it refers to controlling language. Julia Penelope and others are convinced that "patriarchy"— particularly white patriarchy—is the culpable agent. Despite Penelope's tendency to equate a malicious "patriarchy" with all white men, there is still some truth in the theory: the institutions that support our social system are very exacting in their language usage requirements. The university, the law, the government, and the church, have all traditionally been accessible only to those able to enter the discourses established by the institutions themselves. Although there have been changes in the last fifty years or so, access to these institutions has also been traditionally denied to every one except white men. I think, perhaps, the concept of "institution" has taken on a life of its own, irrespective of the individuals who inhabit it. I think, perhaps, genuine social power isn't something in the hands of a specific group of individuals, like white males, but rather something wielded by institutions which happen to be under the current control of white males—there's a difference.

I find something else of interest in this discourse, established by the powerful. One of its basic tenets is that the writer must maintain an "objective" voice. "Objective" apparently means that the writer does not refer to his or her own feelings about the matter at hand, that the proof offered is the material kind—numbers, quotations, experiments—in short, that the scientific method be used to offer validation for a hypothesis—that the writer

does not mention his or her self in the piece of writing. It is this last characteristic that I find most interesting. On one hand, the information is surely made to appear more authoritative if it is not presented as someone's specific findings. It acquires a glow of absolutism, a separation from the merely human faculties of observation that record it. On the other hand, because the finder of the information has no place in the text, it may be possible to argue that the finder of the information is disempowered. Perhaps the institutions that perpetuate the "rules" find knowledgeable individual voices a threat.

But I was writing about what makes a feminine voice. I think perhaps that I am asking the wrong question. The reason I want to know what constitutes a feminine voice is because the voice I have been expected to use is called a masculine voice. What if I take Rich's advice and throw out the dichotomy? What if there are more than two types of voices? Maybe lots of women find it easy to use the voice I previously called masculine. Let's call it now the voice of objectivity-making. I can identify a number of voices off the top of my head, and there are certainly many more—interpersonal relationship-making, bossing, parenting, subordinate, formal-social, personal-social, loving-social, home-private ; then there are specific discourses for all different fields: music, computers, construction, food preparation. Maybe the problem isn't finding or establishing a feminine voice, but finding a combination of voices that will allow me to express what I identify as my personal female experience.

So how do I define this voice I have chosen for the expression of my female thoughts? I have used the objectivity-making voice, as well as fiction, poetry, symbolism, story. I have used my private voice in some cases because what I want to say comes out of my private thoughts. I think any honest voice I use will of necessity be feminine. I am.

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Then there is the problem of truth.

I read what I have written—my inside-out critical discourse.

I ask myself—have I been truthful? I say yes.

I ask myself—have I been honest? I say yes.

I ask myself—why then does the story I've told about myself not agree with any known event? This is, I answer, the purest glory of writing and of language: the word and the event are unalterably separated.

reflections on wolves and music

in response to

the prowler, by kristjana gunnars

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For me, the story always starts with the cover. I look at it for over an hour, turning it over and over, tracing the patterns of the graphic with my finger. It has words on it that I don't understand at all, but I read them anyway: Textinn ber vott um sorg sina. *I have no idea how one properly pronounces these strange words, but I have complete faith that somehow, they will yield up to me their meanings.* Hann stooth og horthi a okkur smastund. *An eye looks out from the middle of the words. Whose is the eye?*

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sometimes, i feel a great yearning towards the myth of mathematics—the cool, precise, all or nothing logic of the language of numbers falling lightly, perfectly and unambiguously into step, each with the other.

this weekend, i read a book called in search of schrödinger's cat*—a marvelous study of the history and mathematics of quantum physics. in the last chapter of the book some of the less accessible implications of the math were discussed. it seems that each event in space-time sets off more than one sequence of probable reality—so that reality, as we know it, is only one of the infinitely many branches on a tree-like structure-of-being. and furthermore, all of these probable realities exist at the same time, and in the same space.*

i wonder whether imagination is the internal process we think it—a thing of the mind—or whether it is external to the individual consciousness, a simple, brief glance at the probable reality next door in space-time? perhaps a text isn't a language function after all, but a magic talisman, a gateway, a key, an entrance into one of those other worlds. i wonder whether anyone is reading the story i'm in.

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I am the reader. I used to believe that as the reader, I couldn't be the star of the narrative, that I was subject to the arbitrary will and whim of the writer. I have come to understand, however, that the writer and reader form a partnership—that together we make a story that is at once uniquely ours and much like everyone else's.

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it seems to me that memories should be offered up as part of an exchange. i want to engage these memories, and tell my memories in return. i want to be a partner—to join the writer in making a story. this isn't the same as simply swapping anecdotes. what I am looking for here is evolution, a new, more comprehensive story that incorporates both my memories and kristjana's. the text of my story would be read after, before or during the text of hers. then that reader could write his or her own story to go with ours.

this is not the same as interpretation. i do not want to search kristjana's memories for symbols and narrative threads; i don't want to apply psychoanalytic theory. i just want to read. i just want to write.

I remember the pre-dawn, crisp and cold. It is not quite spring; the sap is running. I know how to be quiet in the woods, and even in the crunchy popcorn snow my feet make no sound at all. I am fifteen. I stop to listen. I can feel the sun coming up; my blood is rising like the sap. I sing into the quiet, a five note scale starting on G. The music spreads through the woods, searching. I listen and wait. There is no echo.

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I am intrigued by the subject of whores. I decide that the phrase *he wrote the fixer in your room* is somehow connected to the subject of whores, but I am not certain why. For

Kristjana, being a whore isn't necessarily sexual, it's also a metaphor. There is the nation, letting foreign men inside its body, accepting their domination in exchange for their wealth and protection. Maybe the Americans thought of themselves as fixers. Maybe they thought that entitled them to inhabit people's bedrooms.

when i was a little girl I wanted to be a whore. then, of course, i didn't understand that i would have to trade consent for the invasion of my body and acceptance of domination for safety and security. we called whores by a different name then—romantic, mysterious, magical, like something out of a story i might like to be in. we called them ladies of the evening.

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kristjana tells more than one story, she has more than one theme. at times it's a little confusing, sorting out which piece goes where. at the same time, it's stimulating—i find myself responding in kind. kristjana's prowler metaphor skulks through my stories now, mixing into the mythology of my childhood. i find myself wanting to tell a story with a skulker, a prowler. i will a the story of how a girl in red saved my gran from being destroyed by a wolf.

Every morning before breakfast—whether in the warm, predawn twilight, or the icy leftover night of winter—Gran and I would leave our feather beds, dress in what we considered appropriate for the season, and go for a walk together. I mention getting dressed because it was important to me at the time—I was only five; choosing my own clothes—which pants, which shirt, the challenge of getting my underwear on frontwards—was still a novelty. Then I would creep like a prowler down the oak stairway, carefully avoiding the third step from the bottom, which creaked, and might bring my Uncle Jacques, who would forbid the excursion, and maybe more besides.

I would sit on the bottom step, a small, sturdy child with a perpetually solemn expression. My hair would be down around my shoulders, tangled as I hadn't yet mastered braiding it, silver yellow in those days before it darkened, and curly. Despite the braiding of the day before, in the deep night the natural thick ringlets I hated so much would reassert themselves; each day I would awaken looking like Little Red Riding Hood as she was painted in my story books. I had no patience with Little Red and her fear of wolves—and less patience still with her big blue eyes and thick dark lashes. This, at least, was motivated in part by envy, as I thought her big blues made my grey eyes look dull and lifeless. But I could deal with that. It was the way she batted them at the big, strong huntsman when he rescued her that really got to me. I knew even then that wolves were not dangerous to little girls; big strong huntsmen were the ones that required watching.

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Dr. Patel doesn't speak Icelandic. The sister and I don't speak English. Yet they are able to have the conversation about vegetables, the white Inuit and fish.

I wonder if this is the irony that Kristjana is hinting at—that words are not really important to communication after all. What is conversation, anyway?

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I find myself talking to Kristjana as I read and write. We struggle—power has become an issue—whose voice is speaking? Whose experience directs the reading? Who is addressing whom?

— *I need to talk to you about something.*

— *That sounds a bit ominous.*

— *Well, it might be. It's a matter of names. What's happening here is, I'm*

calling me "I" and you're calling you "I." Not only that, I'm calling you "you" and you're calling me "you."

— *Why is this a problem?*

— *Well… there can only be one "I" in the story, and I'm it.*

— *Ah. Tell me then—if the "you" is the addressee, how is the "you" able to ask this question?*

— *You aren't. All you're able to do is be addressed.*

— *Why can there be only one "I"?*

— *Because there is only one author. As the "you," you are a position in discourse, but you don't really exist. I exist, and when you answer me, the answer is just a game, it's really me, answering myself.*

— *It sounds like multiple personality disorder to me.*

— *It isn't the same.*

— *If someone were talking to herself on the street, you'd judge her crazy, wouldn't you?*

— *This is different. As the "you," you're a construct. You're distinct from me only as long as I stay within the discourse. I address you.*

— *I don't buy it. You're talking to yourself, and you have been for pages.*

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Fortunately, my obsession with leprosy is brief. I turn the idea over and over: I think about what it would be like to have my fingers fall off, one by one, and then my toes. I try to imagine exactly what it would feel like. A tingle? an itch? or just a long, drawn out pain? I put down the book and look at my clean, healthy fingers—strong, broad hands, large for a woman's, covered by normal skin—scarred and calloused. I thought for a bad moment that I could catch the disease from the book.

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I don't realize that the cover comes off until I actually open the book. I put the book aside and concentrate on the removable cover. I unfold it, and re-read the whole thing carefully. I examine the bar code minutely, hoping for a clue. I fold the cover, and put it down on the table beside the book—it looks like a book except I know there are no words inside it. I decide it's a symbol of all my expectations about text.

Don't judge a book by its cover.

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I remember sitting on the bottom stair—the hallway lit by a kerosene lamp that sat on a high sconce. Marie, the half-breed who came in to do the cooking, would light it when she came in every morning and leave it there.

It cast just enough light to illuminate the grain in the dark panelling for about a three foot circle around the wick, and to cast weird shadows through the curved railing. If it was summer and I a little late, a skewed rectangle of flagstone floor would be visible, the uneven surface turned into a miniature mountain range by the oblique light.

On either side of the lamp there were portraits—my five times removed great-grandparents: Tessa Von Hydin on the right; her husband Ban to the left. Except for his unusually long handlebar moustaches, which occasionally struck me as strange and wonderful, Grampa Ban with his stern expression and plain Hudson's Bay issue garments was uninteresting to me. Tessa, however, young and pretty in a deep red gown with a lace collar—her eyes the exact same shade as mine, but somehow brighter—she was the object of both fascination and interest. She smiled in the portrait, but I knew her sad story even then, and I fancied I saw the knowledge of her doom

lurking behind those wide sweet eyes. I didn't know then that I would grow up to look just like her.

Sometimes as I waited in those cool mornings, I would whisper to the portrait, confide my own sorrow and confusion. But mostly I sat listening. If Uncle Jacques came, he would prowl silently through the shadows—I would have no warning before his big, hard hand clamped down on the back of my neck. I would be lifted, feet dangling, and he would carry me back to his terrifying room until he considered it a decent hour to get out of bed. I would lie awake staring at the ceiling, trying not to see the dead animals there, the bodiless deer staring down from the wall, wings outstretched, wolf and bearskin rugs with heads still attached and futile mouths gaping.

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Somewhere in all this, a story begins. It is not my story.

Kristjana wrote that. And she's utterly correct, even though when she wrote it, it was a game for her—an attempt to steal the reader's role in the discourse. It was a lie from her viewpoint, but one that came true in the end.

It isn't her story now. It's mine.

I remember the pre-dawn, crisp and cold. How long has it been since the first time I tramped these woods, sending my music out on the wind? It is getting harder to care. And I have other worries that cold morning. Uncle Jacques isn't feeling too well, says he's getting old. We have the same birthday, he and I, the sixteenth of October. I was born on his fiftieth. "A fine gift," he says, and laughs at the irony. He says I am more trouble than the whole farm in a bad year, and the rest of my family combined. He says I taught him to appreciate acts of god and other emergencies as a rest from me. He says I give the words "natural disaster" new meaning.

I do give him trouble—I am stubborn, headstrong and disobedient. But I love him: father, grandfather, brother, friend. I am the only child he ever had.
He is sixty-five in this memory, but still strong and straight. He has the Von Hydin looks—the men are all over-tall and broad, with strong, lean muscles. But we have the same eyes, round and grey, the same lower lip that always looks like it wants to pout. His curls still hang halfway down his back, still thick and elastic, but his are silver now, instead of gold.

I sing into the quiet, a five note scale, starting on G. The music spreads through the woods, searching. I listen. I wait. I smile. I have searched these woods every day for three long years. At last, I have found an echo.

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I know that I am an ever-credulous reader. If I am in a room with a horrible purple carpet and beige curtains, where thirteen graduate students of diverse types and one professor with a beard sit in clashing orange chairs, and if, in that room, there is one person who believes faithfully in everything appearing on a given printed page, then that one person is certain to be me.

Kristjana says the text is a game. I play.
She says it is a detective story. I set out to solve the mystery.
She says the reader wants to steal from the text. I become a thief. It does not strike me just then that the author is a thief too.
I wonder if that is the irony, that a writer is just a reader in disguise.

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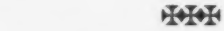
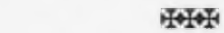
I am a detective. I watch for the clues. I decide there are mysteries. Does Kristjana have leprosy? Do these hints leading to a murder actually relate to a crime? What are the Americans really doing in Iceland? Why does "white" come up, over and over? Is there

significance in the fact that people travel by boat? Is the sister really starving herself, or is she not eating for some reason mentioned only in the margins? If the young man has such an interesting story, why can't he find his own book?



i read of the boy, siggi, with whom kristjana falls in love because they share a love of wooden shoes. first i laugh. then i cry.



Sitting at the bottom of the steps I would usually hear Gran—her three-footed gait swiftly quiet, but distinctive: the soft tap of her cane followed quickly by her left foot, then a short pause, and the more defined thud of her right foot. In those days the left foot dragged hardly at all, and her steps were sure and strong despite the sadness in her eyes, too. She was grey-eyed like me, and like many-great grandma Tessa. Her cane was more than a prop for her feet, although she used it for that: it was a weapon. She was ninety-five that year—so old she was beyond wrinkles—and she was healthy and had all her wits. But she didn't like strangers—I thought then it was a strange eccentricity, but I realize now that she was afraid of them, especially the men—and if we were in town and anyone came too close, she would use that cane, slashing at their ankles and calves.

We would walk, she and I, in the blue dawn. She would tell me stories: Cuchulain and the warrior Queen Maeve, Odin and eight-legged Sleipnir, Grimm's Fairy Tales and Indian stories she had learned from our neighbours, the Cree. And her own stories, her mother's, and her grandmother's.

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The assignment was to offer a reading of the text.

Kristjana offered a game I thought I knew, so I foolishly didn't ask the rules before I started. I should have—the rules are changed. The new rule is: there are no rules. At first I'm frustrated, angry because there is no way to win. Eventually I calm down—there is also no way to lose.

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I remember what I liked even more than hearing stories: telling them, and I always got my turn. Crickets in the grass, light blue eggshells, conversations with feral cats, bold chickadees on my fingers, poems in 2-4 time with terrible rhymes I made up myself, the adventures of a tin whistle or a mateless knitting needle. I never told about the thing that weighed heaviest in my small world; just as she, under the same weight, never spoke of it to me, except once; that was ten years later, the last time I ever saw her alive, three years before she died.

There is still a trace of snow on the ground, so it must be early April or so. She leads me through a hitherto unexplored copse of trees that opens out onto the edge of a rock precipice. There is a split, where a bit of the edge had separated off. In-looking, she shows me an overhang, dark underneath. She whispers that we should keep silent, and we back away to the edge of the clearing. Gran settles herself familiarly on a flat rock and signals that I should do the same.

I remember that cool morning—the birdsong, the faery wind in the white pine and hemlock, the gusts chasing themselves around the treetops. Slowly the sky lightens. I remember Gran's waiting silence, the nubby texture of her red hand-knit sweater. Chickadees, always bold, perch on her fingers, and mine, and delicately pick sunflower seeds from our open palms.

Look. Her mouth moves, but not even a trace of sound emerges. She gestures with her chin, and I see them in the half-light.

Wolves.

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I stand at the base of the ash tree singing, first the five note scale, then songs of bliss I make up as I go along. The tree dances to my voice, and sings back to me in my own voice. I fugue, singing harmony against my own echoes. I dance and caper like a fool, singing, singing, singing! Finally, exhausted, I lean against the tree. I touch him. I caress him like a lover. I trace the pattern of the bark with the tip of my tongue. I lean my head against the trunk and rest. I can feel the sap rising.

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Kristjana and I get into an argument over lunch. I am eating cauliflower soup and caesar salad. She eats one lemon after another—pulp, skin and seeds. We are having a hard time understanding each other, neither of us wanting to give in, even when we know the other is right.

- *I'm just not convinced of the value of literary theory, as a discipline—except maybe as a model for experimental writing.*
- *So what's your problem with it?*
- *Well, two things really. The first is that existing theoretical models are too limited. The models of Newtonian physics were adequate too, until an Einstein came along and extended them into a new paradigm.*
- *So you want to dismiss a science in its infancy simply because it's in its infancy?*

— *Not at all. Actually I'm not being very clear. My real objection isn't to literary theory itself, not really. It's more an objection to literary criticism in general, that theory perpetuates. It seems to me that accepting the scientific discourse as the primary mode for the expression of reactions to thought in the aesthetic mode is an automatic sell-out; a way of saying that the artistic can only be valorized and validated if it is admitted to the paradigm bounded by the scientific method.*

— *The scientific method?*

— *Hypothesis, application, proof, conclusion. It's orderly, yes, but it doesn't and can't do justice to the aesthetic experience and it places art in a position subordinate to science, and hence the material and technological. What's wrong with dealing critically with art in its own paradigm? Somebody must have done it sometime.*

— *No doubt.*

We laugh, then say together — Probably a woman!

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There's a French impressionist whose name I can never remember. That isn't important. What is important is that he painted his pictures by using tiny dots of pigment. When the viewer stands very close to the painting, all she can see is dots. Only when she stands far away can she see the coherent picture. I decide *The Prowler* is just like that. Impressionism.

I am impressed by the true way Kristjana presents her thoughts. This is just the way I would tell my own story: a bit at a time, jumping all around as thought and memory prod each other in various directions.

I decide that the beginning is the most contrived place possible to begin a narrative.

Imposing a time paradigm on a text deprives readers of the natural pleasure of imposing one of their own. I decide that a text without a time paradigm is more realistic. Realism.

I wonder whether something can be both impressionism and realism at once.

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Wolf cubs, four of them, grey fuzzy babies with giant feet and quizzical expressions. And, presumably, a mama wolf—sleek and beautiful in the dawn. The cubs tumble over each other and over the ledge into the clearing where Gran and I sit. The female, a white streak blazing down the side of her face, looks directly at us. She takes several slow steps until she is directly in front of us, about four feet away. She looks Gran and me over solemnly, then turns her back and ignores us.

Every morning that spring, if she can, Gran takes me to watch the wolves. These are moments to which, in later, more desperate times, my mind returns again and again, frantically replaying every detail and colour, every sound, smell and feeling. The female comes to recognize me, and goes about her business without paying any attention to me at all. Soon the wolves come out when I am there alone. There is a much older female, a little stiff and grey, and a yearling male with one white sock, who has not quite outgrown his puppy energy. It doesn't occur to me to wonder what happened to the female's mate.

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i decide to share an honest reading of the text, rather than a contrived one, even though by exposing the trivialities of my thought processes i may end up looking ridiculous. i try to write what I really feel as i read, but regardless of what I want the theorists to say, writing isn't the same as reading. even as I read my own writing, seconds after i wrote it,

even as i write, it runs ahead of me, it changes before my eyes. it's no longer thought but text. it doesn't belong to me any more.

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I bring Uncle Jacques to the tree. I sing blissfully and the tree sings back. He hands me the tools. A stone chisel, made for a hand bigger than mine, but not unmanageable. A hammer. Uncle Jacques tells me they were old beyond memory when his great-grandmother took her tree. Sing to him as you chip, he says. You must take the tree without killing him, without liberating his soul.

I sing. I chip.

It takes me twenty-one hours and fourteen minutes to take him. I neither eat, nor drink, nor stop singing in all that time. When I am finished it is deep night, and cold. The moon is full. My heaving breath forms a halo of mist around my head. I have thrown my coat and sweater, gloves, socks and boots in a pile. I don't remember taking them off. I stand in the snow in my bare feet, steaming. He lies before me, arms thrown wide. I sing, he moves sensuously on the ground. Blissfully, he gives me back my song.

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The cubs have no fear of me whatsoever, nor I of them. The female, although she never interferes with me, watches all five of us carefully—I have no doubt she is keeping track of me, just as I think I am keeping track of her. When violence prowls through the forest—as it often does, searching for me—when it comes near she sends us all under cover—the cubs to their den and me to mine. The first time, I am nearly caught; I cower fearfully in the underbrush until the danger passes.

Once the cubs are old enough, the female takes them to join her extended family group. Although I hear them calling, howling across the forest, I rarely see them except at a distance, a silver flash in the corner of my eye.

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I think of Icelandic ladies strutting their stuff for the benefit of the American soldiers. I think of how inconvenient is the necessity of showing off tits and ass in the Icelandic winter.

I decide that if the Icelandic girls were as thin and hungry as Kristjana writes, they wouldn't have any tits to show off.

i am confused between gunnars herself, the "i" of the narrative, and kristjana as I have constructed her. reality could even come into it—what if I run into gunnars in the hall?

maybe i'll be able to distinguish between gunnars, kristjana and the "i" by breast size. if gunnars is full figured, it will be easy to tell her from the "i" at least. (i know this is not a scholarly mode of inquiry, but i know that i'll check, regardless.)

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Year after year the same female, whom I recognize by the distinctive blaze of white down the side of her face, returns to the old den and we stare at each other across the clearing. As I grow older, I have less interest in romping with the cubs and more in watching them, learning how they see the world. I learn to love them, not just as a novelty, a moment of excitement for a child, but for themselves, for their freedom and wildness and deep-rooted savagery as well as for their gentleness and their care of one

another. In those days I had no place else to send my love except to an old woman who wasn't able to receive it.

I learn to hear the stories the old female tells the cubs: silver fish in swift rivers, rabbits under moist dirt, pounding hooves and silence under moon and star. In dawn and dusk she teaches the cubs the lore of their kind, and in the deep night she howls out the mysteries of life and death.

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I am reading a book called *The Prowler*. It was written by a woman named Kristjana. I want to ask her where she is in the book. I want to say, *Kristjana, where is the author's place in the text?*

Roland Barthes said, *You address yourself to me so that I may read you, but I am nothing to you except this address; in your eyes, I am a substitute for nothing, for no figure; for you I am neither body nor even an object, but merely a field, a vessel for expansion.*

I want to ask Kristjana, *Am I nothing to you?* I don't need to ask, *Where is the reader in this text? I know where the reader is. I am here.*

I heard Kristjana say, *Readers are too educated. You can't put them on anymore.*

I decide that she is wrong. All of text, all of writing is nothing more that putting readers on. How could it be otherwise and still be text?

I decide that writers pretend to be honest, but are in fact, simply more clever than readers. The one who has the voice always has an advantage.

✠✠✠

We are building a relationship, Kristjana and I. We are still wary of each other, but less antagonistic. I'm afraid to confide completely—at the same time, we need each other.

— *It's Uncle Jacques. Even though we know he died before the harp was completed….*

— *Did he?*

— *We just can't bring ourselves to write about it.*

— *So we don't have to.*

— *But that would imply that he was still alive, and we both know that he died before the end of the story.*

— *It's just a story. It's OK if we let him live.*

— *But that would be a lie.*

— *No, it would be a fiction, and isn't that what we're trying to write? — enter into the discourse and all that?*

— *Honestly? We aren't sure any more what we're trying to write. We're confused because we can't seem to reconcile the fictional, the world of the text, with actuality. When we're reading about Uncle Jacques, it's as though he really is alive. We can perceive him, we have a sense of his essence, his identity, but as soon as we put the text down, as soon as we take our eyes off it, he winks out of existence.*

— *Didn't someone say that we, as human beings, see and perceive each other only through discourse, and that there is no way to know another person except as an expression of language?*

— *Someone probably did. So?*

— *So…Uncle Jacques is expressed and defined through discourse when we open the book, so he isn't really dead. So if we don't want him to die in our narrative, he doesn't have to.*

— *Aside from our bizarre logic, there's a flaw in our reasoning.*

— *Oh?*

— *We haven't taken the magic into account.*

— *So now it's magic?*

— *Magic, the soul, god. It doesn't much matter what we call it, but it's the thing that makes us real, that makes us alone. It's how we know ourselves, not so much in our heads—thought is so word dependent—but in our hearts. It's what makes it possible for the chi to flow and for us to understand what it is, even if there aren't any words. It's only when we come into a state of community, of interaction, that we are defined by discourse. The magic that made Uncle Jacques a living, breathing being doesn't exist any more, not here.*

— *On this branch of the tree of being?*

— *Exactly.*

✠✠✠

I decide Kristjana doesn't have leprosy, but perhaps chicken pox or eczema or maybe even sunburn. I come to this conclusion for two reasons. First, she never goes into the leprosy sanatorium. Second, leprosy starts on the fingertips, not on the arms.

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i decide that i am a thief. i have stolen the prowler. would kristjana even recognize it now?

✠✠✠

Every structure, organic or not, grown or made, has a natural harmonic resonance

frequency. This is to say, that if a certain sized waveform is passed through the structure, the structure will resonate, or vibrate together with the wave form. I think of bridges that have buckled and bent in response to certain, precisely spaced gusts of wind.

I have lived and slept in the same room with my tree for over two months. Every day I sing to him as I shape him. I turn him over and over in my hands. He is thinly planed wood now, vibrating blissfully under my fingers as I hum.

A harp! I have shaped a harp. I have no words to express my exultation, my bliss. He has no strings yet, but he has shape. Yet each day, he returns my song more faintly. I tell myself that is only to be expected. I tell myself that the resonance frequency is bound to change as the wood dries out. Uncles Jacques says the soul of the harp is dying. He says he is starving to death.

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The Pleasure of the Text, *by Roland Barthes. I read this small book voraciously. I finish it, and turn it over and read it again. Then I start at the back and read forward to the front. I am in a feeding frenzy—I need to ingest the words—to digest them—to allow enzymes to break them down, pick them up… then to match them with the neurons containing the ideas with which they fit.*

Sometimes the protein mix yields mutations. I wait eagerly.
I remember that a book was a tree once.

✠✠✠

I am ten in this memory. It's early spring. Wolves move their young from den to den to avoid predators. I've never been able to discover where the cubs are born, or any of the other dens. I only know that when the cubs are big enough, the female wolf brings them

to this den site. I've been distracted though, and haven't visited the den even once this spring. Uncle Jacques has remarried; the house, once so dark and frightening, now seems full of light and life.

Gran disapproves of the new bride. She says the girl is far too young, too soft-spoken. Gran is a hundred this year and it seems to me that everyone is too young for her. She is healthy, still, though her bones are brittle. Uncle Jacques has forbidden her to walk in the woods, and for the first time, she obeys. She will not look at me when she refuses me her company. Soon I stop asking. But I think Uncle Jacques' new wife is wonderful. I love her laugh and her big, bright blue eyes. I suppose she is very young for Uncle Jacques, but she is the perfect age for me; she is like a flame in the red clothes that flatter the blond hair that curls to her shoulders.

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It suddenly dawns on me that the reader is a prowler. I should have known before, because it says so on the back of the removable cover. But I have learned that "by the cover" is not the best way to judge a book. It seems to me that readers are more like peeping toms than prowlers—readers look through windows made of text and they spy on other people, gorging on the excitement of watching other people live. But a reader has an option generally unavailable to prowlers and peeping toms—a reader can climb in the window and join right in with whatever's going on.

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Winter turns into spring. The snow melts into runnels of icy water, tips of green emerge from the ground and the branches. Most mornings I sleep in. On the few mornings I do wake up early, I walk around the darkened house, secure in the knowledge that my

Uncle with his too-big hands is asleep beside his new wife. But as the spring progresses, as the sun rises earlier and earlier and the sounds of birds herald the morning, the sparkle goes out of her face. I recognize her expression: we Von Hydin women all look alike.

The sun makes a square of light on the flagstone floor. My hair sits in a jaunty ponytail on the crown of my head, and I actually smile a little to myself as I bend over to tie up my shoe-laces. The oil lamp has been replaced by a hard electric light. Grampa Ban still hangs beside the sconce, and it seems to me that he looks sad, now, too. Tessa is gone, the victim of one of my uncle's rages, leaving behind a panel of undarkened wood to show where she had been. Gran says that Grampa Ban was not a kindly husband—that Tessa was forced to bear too many children too fast, and that's why she died young, but Grampa Ban and Tessa have been hanging on that wall together for 148 years. I had to believe he would miss her. I did.

I don't hear him. Suddenly he is there. His hand on my shoulder. He no longer lifts me up, he just takes my hand and leads me into his bedroom.

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I decide that I am the criminal in the narrative. There is no other that could possibly be the murderer. I add up the clues. As soon as I come into the story, all the people Kristjana has invented die. No wonder she resents me. I wonder if this is her irony, that the presence of a reader in the text is alone enough to kill the author's characters. I invent new people, but they aren't the same. I don't mean them to be.

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It is morning. I kneel in the mud, in the woods, by the place where my tree grew. I put down the things I have brought with me. The harp, shaped, but unstrung, dying a little more every day. A stoppered flask and bowl, old as stones. A dagger, hilts wrapped

'round with stained leather thongs, whetted very sharp indeed.

I empty the contents of the flask in the bowl. It is a glaze, a finish for the wood.

I have been told to pray. I sing.

I use the knife on myself—a slice on the inside of my forearm. I bleed into the bowl. I open and close my hand to make the blood flow faster. I bind the cut with clean white gauze.

With my fingers I mix the blood into the glaze. I sing. With my fingers I rub the glaze into the wood. The harp sings blissfully back.

We share the same soul now.

✠✠✠

Einstein and Born debated fiercely the "Schrodinger's Cat Paradox." This term is used to describe a thought experiment that defines the strange paradigm of quantum mechanics. In a box, one puts the following items: a live cat, a stoppered vial of virulent poison, over which hangs a hammer, and one atom of radioactive material. In a given amount of time, called a "half-life," there is a fifty/fifty chance that an atom will stabilize by expelling one particle. If this occurs, the hammer will fall, break the phial of poison, and the cat will die. Since atomic decay is absolutely random, the only way to know whether the cat is dead is to open the box. But before the box is opened? In what state is the cat then? The answer given in the quantum paradigm is that the cat is both dead and alive, existing in a strange twilight of uncertainty, until the box is opened.

I decide that text is like Schrodinger's cat. Until I look at it, until I read, such meaning as

it may have both exists and doesn't, both in the same space, both in the same time.

When I sing, the harp sings back. I cannot stay away from him. Over and over, we sing the same songs; each singing is special and new. He has a name, but it is a secret between us, and I have whispered my secret name to him. When we make music together, no one can keep from listening. Together we spell the listeners to tears, or anger, or laughter. We know just how to come together.

He both has, and has not, music without me to bring it forth. At the same time, that which is brought forth is more than I could bring forth from myself alone.

He is like Schrodinger's cat, both dead and alive in the same space. I am that space.

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I am The Reader. I name myself. I was lost in the maze of the narrative. Then I made up an even bigger maze, and am even more lost. I need help. Can anybody hear me!?

✠✠✠

I decide that my conclusions about Kristjana's leprosy are not based on very good evidence. I know I'm not supposed to confuse the real author with the implied author, and neither of those with the narrator. I know that I am not supposed to want text-people to be real. Nevertheless, I will check her hands for white patches. If she is wearing a long-sleeved sweater, and gloves, then I'll know.

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When I began I was the reader of The Prowler. *Kristjana wrote it. But we have come a long way together. I find what I read becomes less and less what the text offers.*

The sleuth is worried that it is all a misunderstanding.
In another version of the ugly duckling story, the duckling discovers that there are no swans. There is a suspicion that truth may not exist.

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i have been reading the poetic edda. the norsemen—bards and warriors—tall, valiant people with blue eyes and yellow hair, believed that there were nine places—places where dwelt in days of old, each in their own, gods and giants, elves dark and elves light, dwarves,wanes, fire and death and humankind alone in mithgard—separate branches, all on the world tree yggdrasil. long before understanding came of quantum mathematics, the norsemen knew that stories came from outside their own reality.

i heard kristjana say i don't think there's anything final in this world—we keep changing our minds. i do not like that expression, changing our minds—it makes it sound like minds are Syquest computer tapes—if it gets filled up, just pop it out and insert a new one.

i think about the way idiom allows us to re-handle words, to make them signify in new and strange ways.

i think about the radio station CHED, that i see advertised on billboards around the city of edmonton. in ontario, ched is idiomese for to throw up. *every time I see one of these billboards, I start to laugh.*

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Because it is on the cover, I can't help but privilege tne deck of cards metaphor. I wonder whether Kristjana chose it for the cover, as a clue, or if it is just there because of some incomprehensible marketing strategy. I want it to be a clue. I need all the help I can get.

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I try to keep my mind on the text, but it is like a lens that scatters light rather than focuses it. Every word I read sets off an explosion of possibility, new branches on a tree-like structure of being.

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i force myself to read the passages that have music in them, even though i still don't want to. i force self-analysis. i decide i don't want to read gypsy music passages because they symbolize the same thing for me as they do for kristjana—a way of life that can only be realized through fantasy, never lived. a little voice in my head says that i am a free being—that i can live any life i choose . the voice says that i have nothing in common with so-called "people" in narrative. i am real, they are not. i am self-aware, and free to do whatever i choose, while they are only self-aware when i am being them. they are subject to the whim of their makers.

i am in this text. does this mean that I am no longer real? is this her irony?

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I read somewhere—*It was a time when the pattern was not yet clear. Stories had only begun. There had been no development of plots, no interweaving of incidents, no coincidences had meshed. There were no endings in sight.*

I read in the same place—Kristjana wrote it—*At times I think we have outgrown the story. We are no longer entertained by pretence. There is too much knowledge. Too much self consciousness. There are always other stories, metastories, about which we have made an industry. Degrees are offered, awards given, livelihoods supported for the deciphering of metastories.*

I accepted this partnership willingly, but now, no matter how hard I try, I cannot make her go away.

What if I say that I've been writing lies, that I haven't really read The Prowler*? What if I say that I'm not reading it now? that the partnership is a scam and I've made up every single word?*

Is it even possible to write a non-referent meta-story? Would it be then, a real story?

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I take off my clothes, get into his bed. He watches. His eyes burn. He says nothing; I say nothing. His wife cowers in a corner, bruised, a thin runnel of blood points to the ground from the corner of her mouth. I blame her, hate her for making him angry, for setting him off. But the distinctive musky odour on the sheets is not Gran's, and I realize that she is saved, that Gran has been saved by the coming of this golden-haired woman in red. I can no longer see her, my uncle's wife, but I forgive her, I love her for saving my Gran.

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His hands feel good until they start to hurt. I look at the wolf-skin rug: a female with a white streak down the side of her face, who lives wild and sleek in the forest of my mind.

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love and music have something in common: once learned, you can't ever forget them, can't ever destroy them, can't ever replace them. sometimes you learn a new song, but it doesn't replace the old ones, doesn't make you love the old ones less. likewise, disillusionment, fear and hatred only exist side by side with love, they don't replace it. even when you put them in a text, give them to someone else to make a story out of… they stay. they wait for a new voice, a new bliss.

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At the bottom of the stairs I take my uncle's wife by the hand and lead her into the woods, to the crevasse beside the clearing.

The wolves have returned.

speaking honestly: unlearning the need to be a victim

in response to

speaking freely: unlearning the lies of the fathers' tongue,
by julia penelope

✠✠✠

we are two women separated by distance and time. we have never seen each other's faces, never heard each other's voices. we know nothing of one another; yet we speak to each other. one of us writes a book; it belongs to her. the one who writes the book is aware of attempts to turn her book inside out, and she applauds, she generously turns over the discourse. she participates in the dialectic. this is why she writes the book in the first place. this is why we all write.

if meaning is constructed by a reader, then the meaning i make is ever-shifting, a reflection of my understanding of a system she calls PUD, an exploration of some language issues, an acknowledgement of the possible influences this PUD has on the language that describes my current version of reality.

i am not at all satisfied with the convention that meaning is in *books. i think that meaning is in people, and to discover the meaning i need to know the people involved. empathy is part of it. i can understand the other woman better if i become the writer and write myself into the process of reading her story.*

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It would be impossible to examine in detail all of the problematic arguments in Julia Penelope's *Speaking Freely: Unlearning the Lies of the Father's Tongue* without writing a co-monograph, perhaps something called *Gagged: Perpetuating Self-silencing Through a Manipulative Rhetoric of Accusation and Denial.* I have no such project in mind.

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one of the women in the story i am writing myself into is me. i am 25 years old. i am a francophone, born in montréal, educated entirely in english. i have resented that for as long as i can remember. i have grey eyes, curly hair past my shoulders—dark blond or light brown, depending on your point of view—and bow shaped lips, which, to my considerable surprise, learned to smile in my late teens—i had worried it might be too late. i look so much like the portrait of my great-great-great- great-grandmother that hung in the foyer of the house where i grew up, that sometimes i wonder whether i'm myself, or if i'm one of my own ancestors, somehow displaced in time. my personality is constructed of paradoxes and contradictions: living with abject terror has made me fearless; violence has made me gentle; my power grows out of my powerlessness; and my optimism from transformation of my fear of the future.

i have constructed a julia from the text, a julia whom i call the author. i ascribe to her feelings and motives; i speculate about her past; i assume she has intentions. yet this julia exists only in my mind. somewhere in massachusetts a flesh and blood woman with joys and griefs all her own, lives and loves and works. maybe she will read what i write; she'll know that though she once wrote a book called speaking freely, *i'm not addressing her, the julia penelope of reality, but am addressing my julia, the julia i've constructed out of myself.*

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In her introduction, Penelope claims that she wrote *Speaking Freely because [she] want[s] to change the world* (xxxv). She goes on to explain the assumptions that underlie her position about English and its uses in western society. Penelope is clearly concerned with how women fit into what she calls the Patriarchal Universe of Discourse, or PUD, and she attempts to show how English constructs women as non-

acting and non-valued. Yet her fundamentally flawed underlying assumptions and her deliberately flawed rhetoric undercut the validity of her arguments.

In the final chapter of *Speaking Freely*, Penelope explains how she chooses to speak in the language of her oppressors because she is worried that her readers will not understand her if she chooses an alternative discourse. Yet, the most cursory reading of *Speaking Freely* reveals that Penelope uses the same "malicious" tricks as do her oppressors: hidden agents, inappropriate deixis, appeals to unknown authority, etc, and that she uses them to much the same end as the "men" at whom she vents her considerable anger: to convince a reader that reality as she explains it is the true reality.

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i read what the other woman writes. she doesn't seem to like men much—but is it truly men she dislikes, men who are her oppressors, or are men just a convenient scapegoat for anger whose source she is unwilling to acknowledge? i wonder whether she is angry because she has been a victim of violence and degradation—or if it is because she doesn't want to admit that the feelings that accompany such violence and degradation are soul destroying because they are her own. others may force acts upon us, but the feelings come out of ourselves. i recognize that making meaning between us can only occur if i understand the other woman's anger.

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in a room long way away in both distance and time, a moment that will later become a poem writes itself.
two women
one very young one very old
sit in an octagonal room
cluttered with bits of cloth thread

musical instruments books pennies
a souvenir coffee cup from wawa ontario
decorated with an etching of a canada goose
slippers and unfolded clothes.
the bed has been made today
sunlight streams in the east window
ignites silver curls
and gold streams out the west window
yet somehow the women are untouched by light

the young woman is very young
four or five
a small sturdy child with big grey eyes
quick dexterous fingers a solemn expression
no one has ever seen her smile

the old woman is very old
if the child is five she is ninety-five
a small sturdy woman with big knowing eyes
strong competent hands
still smooth like a child's
from the lanolin in the lamb's wool
she cards and spins
time has smoothed the laugh lines from her face

the old woman spins
they both pretend the young woman is helping
their true purpose is conversation

a moment later, the poem writing itself has changed:
in this picture
there are three people
a child with honey coloured curls
and round grey eyes too big for her face

cowers in one corner
one arm shielding her head
small square hand with
fingers outstretched
palm facing outward

a very old woman lies on the floor
half under an oak table
white curls spill over the side of her face
do not hide the bruised cheekbone
the cut lip
one round grey eye is half open
its expression unreadable
the other is purple and swollen shut

a man with bright gold hair
and round grey eyes too big for his face
holds a short solid staff
in huge capable hands
as he looks at the old woman
a detached and sardonic smile
plays around his lips

as he turns to the child
she stands
braces her feet
straightens her shoulders
grey eyes meet identical grey eyes
their expressions similar
in a way words cannot reach
the child raises her chin
the father raises his arm
steps forward

Penelope seeks to justify her anger rather than attempts to see it for what it is. With sweeping generalizations she begins by attacking PUD—a system—but quickly moves to attacking men, who, in a *malicious alliance* (23) *because of their ideological hatred (25) of women, ignor[e], deny[...] and ridicul[e] women's work* (26), *nobly rush to defend their language from battering... [while being unwilling] to admit their violence against women and children* (42), are *obsessed with their penises* (30) which they use only for fucking, and for *rap[ing] children* (209). Malice, violence and mis-use of power do indeed exist, and they are allowed to exist by a social "contract" or system (perhaps PUD, but I remain unconvinced). These acts of violence are, however, perpetrated by individuals against individuals and are not sanctioned on an individual level. Penelope generalizes men (individuals) into PUD (a system), and accuses all individual men, quite inappropriately, of perpetrating the acts acceptable to the system.

the other woman in the story—i know more about her than she thinks, less than i would like to. i know her name is julia. julia was born fifty year ago in miami. i have a hard time believing that anyone could be born in florida—i think of it as a place where people go for vacations; no-one actually lives there. julia was kicked out of two colleges before she got her BA—she is defiantly proud of this fact. after her Ph.D, julia taught in various places for over twenty years. she now lives in massachusetts and her writing is largely about feminist and linguistic issues. my feelings about julia are mixed. at first i felt only a benign desire to understand her. it seemed to me that we had a lot in common. now i feel a little disgusted by her cheap shots—bewildered by her dislike of men. i wonder whether julia is someone with whom i could ever be friends.

Penelope has displaced her anger onto men in a process about which she herself says: we have no integrity when we say such things (233):

> To say to another woman, "You intimidate me," and believe what that

> statement implies about her intentions in a situation makes us the helpless victims of the malevolence we ascribe to her. When we force her into the role of oppressor and make her the culpable agent of the way we feel in her presence, we simultaneously disguise our internalized feelings of weakness and our sense of powerlessness and insecurity. Some women do set out intentionally to intimidate other women, but the description hides the fact that we could react differently and we fail to realize the behavioural options we have. (232).

Men are *the culpable agents of the way [Penelope] feels in [their] presence*; men "cause" Penelope's anger. Her sarcastic, often cheap, angry attacks on men serve as a demonstration of the very process she describes as lacking in integrity. Penelope is so deep in denial that she herself is perpetrating the process she describes, she cannot even use a masculine pronoun in her example. As well, her denial of her complicity in perpetrating her own apparent victimization calls her integrity into question.

Furthermore, Penelope's angry presentation of her ideas puts out of reach the very thing she claims to want most (to be heard). If she truly wants to communicate, she might try communicating rather than insulting and deliberately alienating the intended recipient of the communication. She deliberately self-sabotages her attempt to do something constructive about the many injustices she sees in the world by using rhetoric that hammers on the problem without building a solution. Her unwillingness to own her anger and her need to sabotage a possible solution also constitute denial. True agency is impossible in an atmosphere of denial.

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those things i said about julia came from the "about the author" section in the back of speaking freely. having read her book, i know some other things about her, too—we can't help but write about ourselves. julia and i have some things in common. she has

been hurt by men. she is angry. i wonder whether she ever cowered in a corner while her father brutalized the person she loved most. somehow i think she may have. i try to imagine julia there instead of me. does she cry and scream and try to stop the hurting? does she pretend to herself that it isn't happening? or does she refuse to show her fear, no matter what? i can see that even though i am much younger than julia, i have learned to accept my pain in a way that she has not. my pain is my own, and because i own it, i can let it go, and have peace. julia still believes that her pain was caused by men, and that it will only go away when men take it away. julia has no peace.

my stories are not and are never orderly, and i have more than one story to tell. somehow i will have to restrain myself. i am not afraid to let my stories tell themselves the way they want to. i can edit them later. not only is the reading of stories subjective, but so is the telling of them.

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excerpt from the private journal of emylie von hydin, august 14, 1979:

and so, like our long ancestors, today we give to the earth the body of our beloved son. i am perhaps the least affected. i'm so old that death is no longer a thing to be feared. still, i fear the loss of brother may be more than the children can encompass easily. jon, jon... he is—was— so unlike the other two. he didn't have their ability to contain themselves; he didn't have their sensitivity. i never would have thought that he would be the one to take his own life...stef maybe, or...what am i saying? those two are utterly fearless and possess indomitable spirit. i can't imagine either of them taking the coward's way.

candace and stef are so unlike to look at—both are throwbacks. stef could pose for the pictures of the noble savage i remember seeing in galleries when i was small; candace is so like the portrait of my grandmother, it's almost frightening. only their eyes are the

same, and their expressions—identical masks covering who knows what madness. they have spoken no words of blame to their father, but i have seen how they look at him. there is more going on than either of them is telling me. somehow i must free them from this man i used to call my son.

(somewhere, julia is writing
the hallways outside her office are empty. she hears footsteps, forces the tension out of her shoulders as they fade down the hall. she wonders what she would have done if the steps had stopped outside her door. she makes sure her office door is locked. she hates herself for being afraid.)

RUN! I TELL YOU, FOR ONCE WILL YOU DO WHAT YOU'RE TOLD—IT'S ALL THE MONEY I HAVE—TAKE IT! I'M SORRY ITS SO LITTLE— DON'T WORRY ABOUT ME, I'LL HANDLE HIM—YES I PROMISE, I'LL DO WHATEVER IS NECESSARY—GET AS FAR AWAY AS YOU CAN—ANYTHING IS BETTER THAN THIS. YOU DESERVE A CHANCE TO HAVE A REAL LIFE—NOW GO! GO AND GET AS FAR AWAY AS YOU CAN BEFORE HE COMES LOOKING—I'LL STALL HIM AS LONG AS I CAN—HERE, LET ME KISS YOU—I LOVE YOU TOO—NOW RUN! DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT LOOKING BACK...

(i ran. i ran until i couldn't run any more. it took over five years, and then i only paused for a breather and ran some more. eventually, i noticed that i wasn't getting anywhere. that was when things started to change.)

(ten minutes later an old woman holds her cane like a weapon. she knows that she will never live to see the end of his fury-malice; knows that he will try to make her believe she doesn't give him any choice. and indeed, hers are the choices now. when she hears his footsteps on the stairs she pulls her lips back into a snarl of rage, and vows to scream her hate at him before she dies.)

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excerpt from candace's journal, december 5?, 1980:

tired. slept at mickey's. he had people over. noisy. found his stash of weed between the mattresses. if i take it i could live on the money for a month. found a 2-dollar bill on the street. thinking about fucking some guy on bay st for fifty bucks. some asshole on a bike ripped my jeans. fuck.

✠✠✠

reading is always an issue. i developed a theory when i was in high school that readers all relate to texts in different ways; that part of the experience of reading comes from inside the reader, and some was due to what the writer said in the book. i thought that reading was a shared experience—a conversation between a writer and a reader. imagine my surprise (and dismay) in my third-year literary theory course, to discover i had not originated this brilliant theory.

✠✠✠

women don't say fuck—
because, i suppose, the pure in body
that is, those who pretend they don't fuck
are by some strange logic
also pure in language

FUCK FFFFUCKCKCKCK

fuck-ing
fuck-around
fuck-off

in the clandestine sanctuary of my solitary living room

i try out the word

FUCK!! FUCK!!!! *i yell*

a hiss of air at the beginning fffffffff...
if i hold the sound long enough
it makes my bottom lip tickle

ffffuck ck ck ck (i hope my neighbors are listening)

ck ck ck ck ck
the word ends like a machine gun firing
machine guns fucking
julia thinks machine guns and pricks
have the same purpose
to shoot off
causing pain or death
to those on the receiving end

✠✠✠

In statements such as *a female's right to terminate a pregnancy is open to question; the necessity of hetero-sexual coitus (fucking) is not* (51) Penelope absolutely equates heterosexual sex with FUCKING. Penelope uses the word FUCK as a pejorative that excludes and dis-acknowledges any possible benefits or positives aspects of hetero-sex. Her two main problems with hetero-sex are first, that it is described by male-centred language (I think she has a point, but that doesn't make the act bad) and second (bigotry, prejudice and perpetration of PUD in action), simply, that it is heterosexual.

Penelope concludes that *heterosexuality and its 'naturalness' aren't supposed to be questioned [in PUD]* (51), yet her prejudices are so obvious in her discussion of "naturalness" that her argument is seriously impaired. She argues that many *species in addition to our own* (50), such as lizards, fish, seagulls and plants, reproduce

parthenogenetically. Penelope is evidently trying to sneak in a falsehood, hoping that the reader will simply accept the authority of the sentence. (In her chapter on the passive she criticizes PUD sharply for allowing and [apparently] originating just such malicious rhetorical strategies.) Humans do not and have never reproduced parthenogenetically in nature. It is theoretically possible to stimulate division of unfertilized ova with intensive technological intervention, but it is not, however, natural for humans to reproduce any way but sexually. Even in vitro, sperm are required, although the sex act is not. Penelope tries to turn the issue of sexual reproduction into the unrelated issue of sexual pleasure/preference.

Penelope denies that heterosexual women in healthy relationships (and many in unhealthy relationships for that matter) find hetero-sex physically and emotionally pleasurable. The French have a good word for the most basic pleasure: jouissance — the orgasm (bliss/pleasure) enjoyed purely for its own sake. It feels good, and there's nothing wrong with that. It's perfectly true that men are often the agents of hetero-sex. However, mature and healthy sexuality is characterized by its mutuality, regardless of the gender of the participants.

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there's a thing about me that i don't think julia could understand. but it's important. i'm in love.

with a man.

i know it's hard to believe. me, of all people. i said before that i was best characterized by paradoxes and contradictions—this is another: i learned to love being a woman by loving a man.

loving a man is not like loving another woman, or even loving myself. he's different from me physically—bigger, stronger, with a voice about an octave and a half lower. he has a

penis.
he's different inside as well. i'm not sure why—it could be either biology or conditioning—i suspect a combination. i wrote a long passage, detailing what i observed to be the differences. he took exception to many of my observations, saying that i was projecting julia's theories onto his behaviour. i listened carefully. eventually we agreed that one main difference is that women give birth and are shaped psychologically in expectation and fulfillment of that experience. likewise, we agreed that men and women often have different perceptions about the status of personal agency: men usually consider personal agency an inborn human right, where many women consider it something that has to be earned.

but it seems to me that if those are the differences, they reach deeper into the human psyche than we can perhaps comprehend; they reach into every aspect of who we are and what we become. the differences somehow transform into matters of the spirit—mere definitions are, as always, inadequate.

sometimes the differences scare me. i find myself wondering whether this fear of difference is common to all women. i sometimes wonder if we don't project our fear of difference onto men so that we don't have to take responsibility for the fear—we say they persecute us so we don't have to say we'd be afraid of them even if they didn't. I wonder whether men feel the same way about us?

i am not afraid of this man i love.
the differences inside are subtle but legion, and i am more intensely aware of my femininity in contrast. i like being a woman.

✠✠✠

For Penelope, men are the sole agents of fucking; men are also the ones who rape bodies

and minds. Penelope makes an ominous connotative connection between "raping" and "fucking." Perhaps in a world of language acts it is possible to argue sensibly that fucking and raping are the same thing, but it is utterly irresponsible and completely untrue to do so in the context of the physical world. Any woman who has been raped knows that there is a big difference between being raped and participating in voluntary sexual activity. The issue isn't that heterosexuality is a form of sexual abuse, the issue is each individual's right to integrity of person.

✠✠✠

rape poem

no stars
no clouds move
no leaves rustle softly

like blankets
covering a sleeper
beloved

no wind blows
no water
drops from a sky
cloudless

no birds sing of spring
speckled eggs are long empty
empty shells thrown away
far far from the nest
broken

there is no inside any more
everything is exposed
water on pale cheeks

garish red on white
slashed open

inside shows outside
one
red
drop
makes a line
pointing to the ground

red lips
white teeth
smooth pink tongue
invites the touch
caress
of lover's
hot
eager
mouth

don't ever use your lips to scream
spit the blood in his face

below
one star
reflected in a puddle

maybe a rat devours her offspring
then devours herself

night
god help me

why can't i see the stars?

i try to imagine julia trying not to cry, refusing to acknowledge the pain ripping between her legs, the shame and humiliation quietly and voraciously devouring her soul. she tries not to hate herself. when she is stripped of her free will, she is stripped of her humanity. there was nothing she could have done.

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Penelope seems obsessed by the, indeed, all too frequent unhealthy sexual relationships that abound in the world without questioning whether they are ideals in PUD or aberrations. It seems to me that Penelope's object is not a truthful exploration of healthy heterosexuality, but a seizing of the topic as an opportunity to indulge in hetero-bashing.

Further, Penelope seems to come to her conclusions backwards: instead of asking what women who have recovered from victimization to a state of sexual agency actually do with their language that is different from what they did before they granted themselves agency, she theorizes based on the distorted assumption that all hetero-sex is unhealthy and non-mutual.

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i run out of patience with julia's anger, her hate. our relationship is not mutual—she does not respect me as i am willing to respect her, as a partner in conversation; she does not care who i am; empathy is irrelevant and so is my pain. she uses me to justify her hate. she uses the pain as a connection between us—she wants me to just believe in her and not ask questions. she wants me to think that we're on the same side because we can

"relate." she doesn't understand that there aren't really any sides.

love poem: sunday, 7am.

i like to lean up on my elbow in bed—
the comforter around my waist
the chill morning air on my bare breasts
tightening the nipples to small pink buttons—
and watch you while you sleep

your hair may or may not be sticking up at some strange angle
and your eyelashes spray dark gold
incongruously angelic on your cheeks—
taking years off your age
and making me wonder what kind of child you were
before time raised her hand and
wiped childhood away

(except its still there in that crazy upstanding hair
and in the way your long eyelashes curve
traces, like the faint leavings
of chalk on a blackboard
after a not-too-thorough application of the eraser)

you're lying on your back—
even though you claim you never sleep on your back
except when i'm sleeping on your front—
one arm thrown up above your head
hand curled and strangely vulnerable
the other reaching for me, even in your sleep
(i think of how those hands feel on my body—
sometimes knowing and deliberate and tantalizing
other times roughly helplessly clutching
caught up in your own maelstrom)

your eyes move under your eyelids and i am distracted

from my contemplation of the hollow
between your neck
and your collarbone
which i am quite seriously considering kissing
and perhaps rubbing with the flat of my tongue
i long to be with you inside our dreams—
partly to keep you safe—
but also to see myself there as you dream me

(when you're awake you look at me with such tender passion
such naked love,
that i can't help but wonder what you see
who you've dreamed me into being)

i thought earlier of waking you—
of stroking my hand lightly upward
from knee to inner thigh and biting your shoulder gently—
but as your mouth twists in protest of lightless inner vision
images of daytime pleasures diminish

i whisper love words with your name
and lay my hand easy on your chest
you smile and then sigh on a long indrawn breath
and never once opening your eyes you roll over on your side
wrap your arms around me
and fall back into deeper sleep untroubled by dark dreams
warm against my chilled skin
your lips against my cheek

✠✠✠

anger is a state i have tried to learn to harness so that i can direct the energy it brings with it outward. yet i am conscious of a deep irony within the intense dynamic of anger: anger can give one the courage to speak. yet as soon as listeners understand that the

voice they are hearing is an angry voice, they stop listening.

✠✠✠

Speaking Freely is dominated by a strange dichotomy: that a woman is either an "agent" (someone who acts against PUD), or a "victim" (someone who acts within PUD). Again, I am struck by the irresponsibility and the deliberate over-generalization of Penelope's definitions. First, the existence of this PUD is by no means certain; second, Penelope makes no distinction between systems and individuals.

Penelope makes a strong statement that *we must do two things to eradicate the unconscious fear that keeps us from acting as agents in the world* (178). This statement would be suspect even if Penelope were writing honestly: it assumes that all women are not agents (are victims); that it is "fear" that keeps women from being agents; and that this fear is "unconscious." Although none of these conditions can be assumed, Penelope is obviously hoping that the reader will do so.

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power is an issue. power can't help but be an issue. it's always an issue. it's the key issue in speaking freely. i'm not sure what julia means when she talks about power. i think she's saying that men have power and that they use it to keep women from having power. i also think though, that julia doesn't want power shared out equally among all people. i think she wants women to have power so they can use it to punish men. this is not real power. real power is internal and cannot be transferred from one person to another, with one person losing it and another person gaining it. that power is a zero-sum commodity is one of the myths of our culture. nor is it really possible for one person to have power over another. we each have ownership of our lives and our feelings. we have choices. nobody makes anybody do anything.

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julia sits at a cluttered desk in a hard chair in a cramped office. it's late. she stretches, rotates her neck, clenches and unclenches her hand. she slurps back half a cup of cold coffee. she doesn't think about the past any more, except to justify her present feelings. she wants to change the world, but she doesn't know how. she doesn't understand that reversing hate doubles it rather than cancels it out. she picks up her pen, and continues to write: *yes. but like any run for freedom it will be dangerous, and there will be losses. if women have colluded with men in their own oppression, then we must stop nurturing our oppressors, and recognize that men are our oppressors, that our oppression as women is not an "accident" but systematic and purposeful and will not end until we do what we must to free ourselves.*

it's time to reclaim childhood
the past that in your sickness
you took from me
the past that in your sickness
i gave to you

for protection it has hidden its horror
disconnected yet always close enough to hear
speaking itself in anxiety powerlessness

the shame wears your name now
not mine i give it back to you
your darkness.

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I cannot help but note that Penelope gives no value to female agency—in her system, women are either at the mercy of male agency or, like her, they pretend that they are not. Penelope also seems to feel that agency is a thing that can be granted, and must be won; that it will be given, if only women can make men listen long enough to understand that women deserve it. It does not occur to Penelope that agency can only be granted to the self by the self: the only permission we need to be who we are is our own.

That individual women can "self-actualize" —that is, become happy individuals who are able to fulfill their potential as human beings, is never acknowledged meaningfully. Penelope's main goal is to form a woman-centred universe of discourse (that is, to make MUD out of PUD—there has to be a better answer).

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sometimes, i think of those times after i left gran, but before i figured out where i wanted to be. the memories are sporadic—sleeping where i could, getting into fights—one time running for blocks from a pack of feral street dogs—injecting god only knows what into my veins. i remember neither laughing nor weeping in all that time. no-one knew my name.

i remember clearly the day everything changed. i had emerged from my depression long enough to call my mother, but although i had a roof over my body, my head was still god only knows where. one day a friend dragged me off to a narcotics anonymous meeting, ostensibly to keep him company. i wasn't overly impressed with the notion of spending saturday night with a room full of drug addicts—and i had an unacknowledged fear that i would go there and discover i was one. i certainly didn't expect to get anything out of

the meeting. to my surprise and dismay, my unexpected feeling of disappointment that i didn't *belong to this group of loving, compassionate and peaceful individuals peaked when it was my turn to speak, and something broke inside me. i curled up into foetal position and sobbed my heart out for half an hour. when i could talk, i spewed out the whole story—abuse, rape, jon's suicide, running away, and finally even my fears about my drug use.*

no-one left, no one interrupted, no-one offered advice. when i was finished, a lethal-looking biker with a long black beard and moustaches smiled in the friendliest way imaginable and said "we all just do it one day at a time."

my friend drove me home after the meeting. he said "why didn't you tell me?"

julia would say that i didn't speak because i had been silenced. she would outline how the patriarchal linguistic paradigm forces barriers across women's speech— and she may have a point.

but i disagree. individuals have the right and ability to make choices. as i told my friend, i didn't speak because i chose not to—and i had a right to that choice.

julia tells us that the state of our language and our culture is due to malice—a deliberate and malicious series of actions on the part of males to keep themselves in power.

as i write myself into the text, i believe i understand where julia is coming from— there is a place in my mind and experience, too, where all men are the malicious perpetrators of acts of violence against women, designed to humiliate and subjugate—where power is the only issue and love is meaningless. i'm glad i can choose not to live out my life in that place.

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Penelope subverts her contention that women can over-come victimization in PUD by contradicting her own argument. She says that *it is dangerous to take the advice of New Age rhetoricians, namely, that what we say will make some aspects of reality appear and others disappear, as though changing our descriptions might visibly alter the reality in which we live* (214) . She goes on to say that such thinking implies that *we are responsible for our oppression, that, if we really wanted to, we could end our experience of oppression by describing it out of existence* (214). Penelope calls such rhetoric *androcentric* (214) and implies it is part of the language weapon that men use to perpetuate the victim's stance. Yet in her introduction, she strongly states that *one of the crucial ways of ending our oppression must lie in thinking ourselves free* (xxix). She quotes Andrea Dworkin's statement that *Words matter because words significantly determine what we know and what we do (xxix). Finally, in her summation to the introduction she says that learning to avoid such traps [descriptions that perpetuate oppression] will impel us to dis-cover the descriptions that will enable us to reconceive the world and ourselves as active agents in the world* (xxxvii).

Penelope offers two solutions to women's victimization:

1) *we must identify explicitly the male agency that rapes our bodies and our minds;*
2) *we must destroy the patriarchal programming that tells us we are weak and incapable of fighting back against men and their institutions.*

(178)

These solutions have implications that call her integrity and, especially, her authority into question. The male agency that rapes our bodies and our minds must be identified as an issue separate from the issue of language. The act of identifying the perpetrator of an

act of victimization is a recovery issue. It is a thing that must happen before a victim/survivor can begin to move past an event or series of events in the real world. I find the word "rape" here very irresponsible. Women's bodies are raped by men's bodies. Rape is not a language act; it's an act of violence in the physical world. Furthermore, because rape is by definition an act that is perpetrated by force, no victim of rape can be an agent in the rape.

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I have already mentioned what I consider to be a fundamental flaw in Penelope's argument: that language acts and body acts are not one and the same thing. Penelope's definition of the "victim's stance" should be considered with the second of her two solutions and is based on this flaw:

> *We perceive the world—and ourselves in the world—only as white men describe our situation, and fail to conceive of acting as agents on our own behalf. Whether we attribute control to some deity or supernatural agency... or to a collective entity, probably society... we perpetuate our status as victims, vulnerable to perpetual predation. Victims cannot act; conceptually restrained by the agents within, they are unable to think of themselves in any way but acted upon* (157).

I have already questioned Penelope's conceptual framework, which presents all women who have not opted put of PUD (which she has not done, although she claims to have—her arguments, their structure and expression, and her need to make them, indicate how deeply enmeshed she is) as victims, or at least as positioned in the victim's stance. There is a distinction between non-agents and victims. Non-agents choose not to act—to them, the price for action is too high. Victims, however, cannot act—this is what being a victim is all about. But the reason victims cannot act has little to do with being over-

powered by language acts (which isn't to say that a language act can't be used as a weapon!). Victims cannot act because they are restrained from action by fear of being hurt or killed—the price for action is so high that there is no possibility of choice. Victims recover and learn to become agents when they are convinced of, and have some practice at being who they are without someone standing over them ready to hurt or kill them whenever they challenge the power of the victimizer. But being a victim rather than a non-agent is not just a matter of degree. While non-agents may elect non-action, they still have options; victims elect nothing and have no options. Indeed, while calling on victimization as a reason for writing her book and while appealing to the community of "we" who have been victims, Penelope does not really seem to exhibit any understanding at all of what victimization really is.

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i am uncertain. i have said that i want to enter the dialectic, that i want to make julia's book somehow my own by understanding it. i came to this desire for understanding with certain assumptions—the most important of which is that i would come to sympathize with julia and her words. instead, i find that, while julia's hate is soul destroying, her ideas about what to do with english to make it more difficult to be dishonest without lying interest me, and i am able to see their validity—but not only for women—for people. i find it desperately and strangely ironic, however, that julia instructs readers in the use of her ideas, but declines to use them herself.

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Penelope writes of the horror of an adult man raping an innocent child, but she denies the reality of the harm done to child's mind and body by suggesting that convincing the child to ask "by whom" upon hearing an agentless passive in conversation will somehow empower the child. I agree that language use may serve to perpetuate the fear and denial

the child may be feeling, but the fear and denial exist independently of the language used to describe them, and although they may occupy the same space, they don't cause one another. Penelope's use of such strong negative examples to generate the strong negative feelings that are so necessary to comprehend her book when she clearly has no real sympathy for the "weak" women who continue to construct themselves as victims is deeply insulting and dangerously manipulative— characteristics of PUD rhetoric she criticizes sharply.

✠✠✠

i am uncertain about another thing. i cannot follow the dominant discourse, which julia calls men's. my thinking is neither linear nor objective. but I am equally uncomfortable with julia's discussion of this same issue. she attacks the scholarly discourse as a thing of men—oppressive, immoral and plainly and simply wrong. but she uses it, and she uses it the same way men use it.

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Penelope does not make careful distinctions between language, thought and action. She does says that *language mediates between cognition and the semantic level of language* (230), which sounds like it might apply, but doesn't mean anything. Her fuzzy definitions carry over into a further refusal to accept that language and women's personal conceptual frameworks are unrelated to (again denial) the bottom line of sexual victimization. Quite simply, if a man wants to rape a woman he will do so and there is nothing she can do about it. If he wants to kill her when he's done, he will do so, and there is nothing she can do to change it. A woman's ability to use language in a way that liberates her mind from the patriarchal programming of which Penelope is so afraid, will not and cannot make one bit of difference to whether she is raped or not. You cannot defend yourself from determined physical force with words. We should instead work

toward a society in which men are less likely to view women as objects to be raped and killed. A collective effort to change the image of women to make us less obvious targets for violent men could, perhaps, involve language. But language is only one aspect of the problem.

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there is a point after anger where hearing is possible, where the message resolves itself from a morass of image, metaphor and rememberings-that-don't-hurt-the- way-they-used-to, where the spoken merges with the experienced to produce a moment of knowing.

this is what, i believe, julia was trying to do—to evoke the reader's experience to form a foundation for her arguments. she fails. not because she doesn't evoke the feelings, but because once evoked, she tries to displace them and use them to manipulate the reader.

me. mine. i am the reader, the writer, the victim, the agent. i fear, i love, i hate, i dance like the aurora, glowing light against a starry black sky. i am a woman; beautiful, powerful, sexual. i am uniquely and miraculously myself.

julia didn't take me into account.

the women on the shore: poems 1991-1992

in response to

an atlas of the difficult world: poems 1988-1991,
by adrienne rich

For me, a book always starts with the cover. The cover of *An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988-1991* is blue: a dark, dusty version of china blue. It looks good on my coffee table, a precise colour match for my curtains and lampshades, for the stripe in my couch.

There is a picture on the cover, a painting by Edwin Romanzo Elmer, called *Magic Glasses (Still Life with Magnifying Glass)*. A glass dessert dish holds a magnifying glass, in which are reflected the windows that look out onto a farm yard. Because of the angles, more than one window is visible; each window looks out onto a different scene.

Perhaps the dessert dish symbolizes the text into which the magnifying glass/reader enters. As through the lens, the reader sees a different scene, depending on her angle. My angle will always be unique, as I am.

it is, perhaps, somewhat unusual to begin my writing about adrienne rich's work by talking about another book altogether: annie dillard's the writing life.

i am having a difficult time writing about an atlas of the difficult world. *my voice is unfamiliar to me. this is not as strange as it seems—it is the voice of my adulthood, speaking my adulthood. i have not considered myself an adult for very long. furthermore, this is a time in which i have acquired much self-knowledge—i have come a long way on a path that continues into the deep future, that springs from a far past. i try to write about the part of this path i am on, but i have no perspective, no angle.*

so i turn to annie dillard, who wrote: Write as if you were dying…. That is, after all, the case. What would you begin writing if you knew you would die soon?

i haven't been able to get this advice out of my head. so i think about it, carefully, fully, as honestly as i can. and i don't just think about it rationally, i go with it emotionally, i fantasize about death (is this "method" writing?) what would i write if i knew it was the last thing i would write before i died?

dying…

dying…

dying…

i would dream of drowning on a sunny, icy day in late autumn…

maple leaves are red, afire… i am on opeongo lake in algonquin park…

i am on opeongo lake in a red canoe at three in the afternoon.

i am enjoying the weak sun on my face…

i am enjoying the smooth water.

i j-stroke strongly against the current…

i do not see the clouds that loom behind me.

I

A circle of women, eyes on the floor, listening for hope
— other women's voices tell the story of your life which is their life too
everywhere night after night words running after each other
But here in this place on Wednesday night at eight in straight
backed wooden chairs around a worn plywood table basement walls dripping
condensation like tears posters pictures damp around the edges stained brown.
What cannot be said out in the silence — at home among damp diapers and squalling
infants to well-meaning mothers-in-law in tailored business suits to moth-eaten
priests with stiff collars and black morality hands red with wine like blood —
can be said here.
In this dank church basement
one says: "For years I told myself I stayed for the sake of the children.
In a sense it's even true. I needed to destroy everything I loved and staying

destroyed them as surely as anything I could have done.
The problem now is that none of them will have anything to do with me.
Don't they know I was just loving them the only way I knew how?"
One says: "He had barricaded himself in safe behind rotted
wood and tattered curtains.
I could hear him whimpering terrified
sure in his psychosis that someone was trying to kill him.
I just walked away went home packed up my stuff and left.
I don't even know what happened to him I suppose I'll have to track him down
someday if I decide to get a divorce."
One says: "I never knew from day to day
what was going to happen. Crisis was the factor that moved life forward.
I prayed every night for the crises to end and when they did
three weeks later I had a nervous breakdown. I had no idea how to act."
One says: "I love him I always will
What does that make me?"

In the church upstairs the organ
rehearses a lament for tomorrow's funerals
the music stops starts stops
it seems that songs of redemption cannot easily become
a background to these voices they fight
until they cannot fight anymore and even then
the light is just too bright.

— — —

I don't want to hear how he doesn't actually hit her,
is just a little too rough with big hands bruising slim wrists
and cuffs along the side of the head don't count.
I don't want to hear how breadwinners men
are the ones that really need education and
that she really didn't want to finish that degree and so what,
it was just a dream anyway and dreams are easy enough to let go.
And I don't want to hear how he ran over the dog
in the driveway during an argument and told everyone
it was her fault and she believed him because he's all she has left

since the children whom she ruined are gone how he laughs
when she uses the spare room because
if he wanted her he would just break down the door.
I don't want to think how her guesses betrayed her—
that he meant well, that she
was really the stronger and ought not to leave him
to his own apparent devastation.
The weak sun shines oblique
over this rocky landscapes shadows making
mountains from pebbles glare making matches of volcanos.

— — —

The North Saskatchewan winds around my feet
this wide river crossed and recrossed with steel bridges
here at its turn moving anonymous cars
blindly over water. When you knew me
it was lakeside crashing autumn pounding
against city water breaks. This is no place you ever knew me.
But if you were in this city you would
no doubt come here to find me
because as always my eyes seek out water. What I love
is the unmappable centre the sunlight
sparking off peaks floating the vapour
on the air to unknowable clouds. Droplets find their way back
but there is no predicting where: the sky blows water in from the Pacific
and leaves it in this river
or this water could come from the glaciers in the north
the route cannot be traced.
The edges ebb and flow though their interface of
tamarack pine and aspen
makes a green line one could follow from the sky.

I come from a land of red maple flamboyant in autumn
but live now amidst muted golds yearning
for expanses of grey lake edged by man-made

parks of smoking industry and rusty cars
though I will never go back.
As though the edges cannot be escaped a river leads
from one place to another. The boats are
the same, but the woman you knew paddled in circles,
muscles aching in the hazy sunlight.
She travels under starlight now, the water may be the very same
but it takes her somewhere.

— — —

in every part of canada, aboriginal people tell variations of the story of weesuckajack and the diver. in this story, for one reason or another, there is a great flood and all the world is covered with water. weesuckajack floats on a log with his three friends—duck, beaver and muskrat. weesuckajack knows he could recreate land if he had even a tiny bit of mud from the original. He sends his three friends one by one under the water to see if they can retrieve some of the precious mud from the bottom of the now huge ocean. the third diver, usually muskrat, dies in the attempt, but when weesuckajack looks under muskrat's fingernails, he finds enough mud to form into a disk, which he floats on the water. he breathes on the disk and it spreads, and as it does, muskrat is revived. eventually, the land is large enough to support life, and weesuckajack recreates plants and animals, and for the first time, creates humankind.

this isn't just a funny little story about a great flood. Although i have read many versions of this story, i first heard it as a small child from my half-brother's grandmother. after she told the story, she said some interesting things about it, all in french. i remember one particular statement, which i translate here:

> *you think this is just a pretty story? but i know things about this story, it is about birth, about the beginning of life, about the beginning of spirit and*

the knowledge of life. the water is the dream; we come out of it into life, in the end we return to the mud we are made from, and sink back into the dream.

✠✠✠

I read the first section of a book: An Atlas of the Difficult World *by Adrienne Rich. I can't help but assume I'm going to learn something from the process.*

What do I learn about Adrienne? What do I learn about myself?

I suppose, though, that my first question must be: What do I hope to get out of this?

I try on what is for me, a new twist on an old idea: in reading, readers enter their own minds and are directed through them by the "instructions" provided by a text. Readers become the protagonist, but readers are always and ever themselves. I used to believe that the reader's experience informed the text. Now I believe the opposite: The text informs the reader's experience – but the experience is the reader's.

Reading poetry is unlike reading fiction, which is again unlike reading non-fiction or critical prose. It seems to me that the protagonist of poetry is the writer, always, of course, as constructed by the reader. In order for me to become the protagonist of this book of poetry, I had to become the writer.

I reread the back of the book carefully. There is not much about Adrienne – she lives in California, this is her thirteenth book of poetry, she's had a distinguished career and has won the 1991 Commonwealth Award in Literature. None of these things makes her special, unique.

From the poems, I learn a few more things about Adrienne: I learn that she is brilliant, articulate and wise. In trying to reconstruct her poems into my poems I come to understand and indeed, rejoice, in how much more I still have to learn about both writing poems and seeing people and events. Adrienne is not only talented, she is experienced in a way that I simply cannot emulate. We have things in common: we both believe that oppression can be insidious and subtle, but individuals can free themselves in their minds, and that true freedom is a choice regardless of external circumstance.

But the poem "This is a map of our country" does not make me want to write a next poem. It is not a good poem; it doesn't explode with possibilities. Only the last lines strike me as interesting: "I promised to show you a map but you say it is a mural/ then yes let it be those are small distinctions/ where do we see it from is the question."

But trite poem aside, I learn something of Adrienne. I have read this collection over and over, and I feel I don't know this woman at all — I only understand something of her passions. But here I see for the first time, not only her passion and her politics, but her fear. Oppression itself is not her greatest fear, she is afraid it will never stop.

this is as far as i get in my first draft. kay reads what i have written and asks a question: i agree with you about the poem, and feel intrigued by your comment about r's fear that oppression will never stop. can you explore your own response to this fear? is it one you do/don't share?

defensively, i review the poems carefully, looking for the exact words that inspire my reaction. i don't find them. i note that adrienne's poems rarely look forward—that they are almost always in the present tense, occasionally in the past. I note that her work is not generally optimistic—she never says "everything is going to be ok." she never says "don't worry."

i have to admit that there is no direct textual evidence to support my assertion, no line that says "my greatest fear is that oppression will never end." yet despite this lack, and despite my suspicion that I may simply be projecting my own fear onto the adrienne i have constructed, i still feel that i am right. if adrienne had faith in the inevitability of a non-oppressive society, she wouldn't need to write, to keep working to make it come about. i think fear is an inevitable outcome of a lack of faith. what if it doesn't work out?

I was filled with this fear when I watched the republican national convention on TNN. What if this christian fundamentalist-republican rhetoric of no abortion, no rights for gay families, and ascendancy of patriarchal religion turns into a reality? How easy in such a climate for the underlying assumption of the american constitution, that all men have a natural and inborn right to personal liberty, to be taken literally—"all men"—what about everybody else? Where can all this lead?

I read novels like Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, *and I get afraid. Such things are all too possible.*

Perhaps I am projecting my personal fear of bondage, oppression and slavery onto Adrienne. But a woman as aware of the politics of oppression as she is not going to be taken in by mere rhetoric. I have no doubt that she's afraid, too.

✠✠✠

i recline against the stern…

feet extended, required life jacket tucked behind my head…

time passes… i don't know how long…

the wind rocks the canoe. i jerk upright.

my eyed glazed, i realize i have fallen asleep…

black clouds gathered into thunderheads…

whitecaps roll, push against the broadside of my red canoe…

wind comes strong, whips my hair upright. a flash…

an ominous rumble to the east.

i slide off the slat, kneel on the bottom of the boat, balance my centre a little lower and a little closer to the bow. i am not afraid, only embarrassed. i know better than to fall asleep in my boat. my campsite is due east. without consciously thinking about it, i abandon the notion of trying to cut against the wind.

i'm a solid mile from the shore in every direction…

the quickest route off the lightning plagued

water will be with the wind behind me.

i lift my paddle and strike out to the southwest, quartering the high black waves…

✠✠✠

III

An old souvenir coffee cup decorated with an etching of a Canada Goose
light gold gilt around the edge mostly washed away.
The table is covered with paper pens
a macintosh computer perches somewhat precariously on one corner.
A fly buzzes in flat desperate circles against the window.
Her loom is behind me. I don't look at it the half made cloth
jewelling in the afternoon sunlight
  clear and autumnal
that streams in the west window.
Through the glass the farm yard has been graveled
  the rooftops painted, a wire sways from barn to house
  where a telephone connects us to the rest of the world.
James Bay in the distance is grey blue smooth to my near-sighted eyes above
the trees I see it along the curve of the world.
In short summer geese squeal in joyful youth breeding meals for hungry
Cree in the early autumn on the dank marshes.

— — —

They said she died and when I went back home for the first time in three years
I saw the painted doll they said was her
And I will admit it it resembled her
and more frightening resembled me.
the white curls were arranged artistically
a disordered tangle around her head.
I remember seeing them silver before they were white but never
gold except in the portrait hanging in the front hall in a gilt frame
that for all its ornate embellishment
was not nearly so gaudy as the flash in those grey eyes
that could in those early days see the world as it really was
and love it anyway.

The fine hands were lying folded on her chest
smooth as a girl's softened by a hundred years of spinning
and weaving lambswool rich with lanolin into magic
carpets and dragon tapestries and cloaks of invisibility for four generations of sons
and finally in the fifth generation a daughter.
I was born the year she turned ninety.

maybe she did die.

We climbed once into Uncle Jacques' skiff
sailed off across the wavy sound. I remember noticing the first time
feeling human will to make a route over the rootless rock of icy
salt water on James Bay in the sting of the gusty northwest wind.
She threw her head back and chimed laughter over the water to echo off cliffs and
bear northward over stunted pines to the ice.
We must have looked like identical witches our hair whipped upright
and salt drying on our faces glistening like crystal in the sun.
She said *Never let boundaries hold you back!*

Yet for all she was too much for any woman to be—her life
so full she couldn't include one more thing she took herself to the limit

and passed it. When violence came breaking doors
off hinges bruising pale baby skin beating good animals
to their deaths with whips—she brought all her ardent spirit to bear against it
in the end all she had left to give was her presence.
she might have died then but she didn't
no longer flashing gaudy in the light
not beautiful—and still she stayed.

And now the torch lights the pyre and the earth and air take her
as they have taken so many other things —
nations disappear gallant dreams forgotten and famous men so much dust
museums their works of art stained then mildewed and finally
crumbled,
even the land itself moves into new configurations under the stars—
and women who glow so bright it makes their backgrounds disappear—
they vanish too.

— — —

I have been trying to write all day the sun is westering orange
the wind comes up I can hear the water speaking to the rocks in the distance.
Though I speak their language I cannot make out the conversation.
The loom remains silent and I wonder why she started this particular work
when she knew she would never live to finish it.

Never let boundaries hold you back. And so I become her memory
the ebb and flow of blood taking on flesh again
just as she once imagined me laughing and sparking
floating on the water in the sun and wind
among the flotsam of the pictures in her mind
once her dead body was ashes in the earth.
Such pictures, perhaps outlive any works of the hand
hanging inert and unfinished and survive among their alternatives.

✠✠✠

An autumn without a killing frost so far, still warm
feels like a time of self deception, a memory of pushing
limits in youth, that intricate losing game of innocence long overdue.

i long to write poems. reading poems always makes me want to write more poems. it seems that there can never be enough poems to express who i am and how i see the world. i am pleased that adrienne has undertaken the writing of some of them for me. i hold her poems under a magnifying glass, tilting the paper this way and that; i peer along the edge of the glass. each angle yields something new.

I am finding it difficult to write. I am obsessed by the minutae of my geography. As Adrienne points them out, I find myself examining every detail. Her poems examine more than one geography, more than one map. I find myself doing the same. First there are my external maps — my body, my apartment, each room, and the larger environment of the co-op in which I live. The apartments of my neighbors. Then there is the neighborhood, and the greater area that I call the city of Edmonton; the grocery and convenience stores I frequent, the farmers' market, the university. It's autumn; right now everything is turning gold.

The internal maps are just as important. It's almost impossible to fathom a place on the internal map where Adrienne and I might share some common territory. She is about the same age as my maternal grandmother, has been married, has three sons. Her marriage ended and she explores her lesbian sexuality. I have never married, never had a child. Less than half her age, I grew up under a different burden of expectations. I have never taken the opportunity to explore lesbian sexuality, and for the moment, at least, have no desire to do so.

But I do discover that we have some things in common: for one thing, we both suffer from rheumatoid arthritis. Adrienne was 22 when it was diagnosed; I was 19. We have both been affected by the suicide of someone we loved in a difficult way: Adrienne's estranged husband, Alfred Conrad, killed himself, as did my half-brother, Jon. People don't kill themselves on impulse—there's a long period of dysfunctional behaviour beforehand and a long period of grief and guilt afterward that survivors must struggle through. Adrienne and I have this process in common. I don't know whether Adrienne struggles with the same issues as I do; I don't know whether she has struggled with drug abuse or with the aftereffects of sexual victimization. But I do know that she came to adulthood much as I did—unwhole and silent, and had to struggle for a self and a voice to express it.

Most important—we are both women in a world that doesn't seem to like women very much. This is, perhaps, our common border, much like that between our nations: the longest undefended border in the world.

✠✠✠

i go back to the fear, mine and adrienne's, that oppression will never end. the most frightening oppression is self-oppression—the desire for unconsciousness. she implies that waste — of both consciousness and resources— is one of the common grounds on which her country is built.

(like a detective, pretending i am sherlock holmes herself, i pull out my magnifying glass and examine the notion carefully from a variety of different angles. once, i look up into a mirror, see my eye, gross, distorted, huge, round through the glass. distracted, i stand, go to the mirror, examine my features one at a time, ballooned by the glass. i stick my tongue out, make a face like fish gasping in the air for oxygen, like a troll with a

tummyache. i bat my eyelashes, chuckling delightedly with myself. the man i love walks in, raises his eyebrows, shakes his head. i thought you were working, *he says.* i am, *i answer truthfully.* ah. *he nods again, doubtfully.* are you having a good time? *he finally ventures. i face him, hold the glass in front of my mouth, open my lips and jaw to the widest possible extent, thrust my tongue out as far as it will go, all the while producing a wet, gurgling gagging noise.* if you think i'm ever going to kiss you again after this display… *he threatens, trying not to laugh. i pull in my now sore tongue, chuckle, wipe the accidental saliva off the glass on my sweatpants. he ignores the saliva and its removal studiously.* what do you want for supper? *he asks with an air of long suffering.* whatever you make is always good, *i answer pleasantly, gleefully and uselessly. he shakes his head again, steps up and puts me in a light headlock, and belying his earlier threat, kisses me hard on the lips. after he leaves, i play in the mirror a bit longer, but it isn't nearly as much fun without an audience. eventually, i get bored, sit down in front of the keyboard again, start thinking about waste.)*

i think about waste, about people not using the incredible abundance that they were simply born with. yet i have found that even those who are the most deeply unconscious can wake themselves.

IV

if intensity of emotion is an addiction you should have stayed there
in that basement bedroom half conscious on the floor
thin mattress circled by bags of powder razors knives empty
glassy eyes one window one foot square dark with soot

but you woke up and now you sprawl legs
open in a cafe doorway on yonge street your black silk shirt
unbuttoned a treasure chest of golden hair gleaming
you harden your muscles into ridges smug in a sunny spotlight

your eyes pull at passing women in heels
cheeks disguised with rouge as alive but
decaying behind coloured contact lenses and spiky stuck mascara
you flash sleazy yellow fire then lid your golden eyes
your tongue slides along the edge of your cup slippery through the foam
you *can* care it doesn't mean you're addicted
you're *in love* you don't have to run away

i sit here stirring until the foam disappears
and watch your eyes seduce every woman your tongue linger
wet on a plastic spoon you suck the foam from your lips
while your desperately scornful eyes
snatch and belatedly throw away

because if you don't care then there's no addiction
and you don't ever want to be addicted again
when it's one day at a time you don't have to explain
if that's what it takes, then just keep licking the cloud of foam
away and invite the next tight leather skirt over
for an afternoon cappucino

— — —

dark faces circle in the attic with sun blinded eyes she shrinks between
the cupboard and the wall dissolving out the window into the blue
blue of your eyes blue as lake blue as sky blue as stillborn babies
broken blue prisms sharp in her palm—she plucked out her lover's eyes
she sacrificed pieces of her body for the illusion a fantasy
of warmth of love now she flails and begs
trapped in this ring of blazing faces—
rub me
in the ashes of your cigarettes grind me into the shards of empty vodka bottles
smear your blood between my legs and watch it swell into rivers
that flow back here streaming down my thighs

he doesn't know how to hold her down broken and trusting he cannot see

passed the palm of her hand as dark faces wrestle her to the ground
she screams —don't leave me nobody hears not even herself
she begs — let your fingers be knives inside me let me eat
your oyster mouth your open cysts ooze juices down my chin
shoot love into the vein of my arm watch it drip from my fingers
shred my breasts lashing with your cock just don't leave me

dark faces lunge at her body two blue crystals drop from her hand
(let me suck the cancer out with my ardent teeth.)

— — —

those needed for the meticulous delicate work
of reaching the heart of the desperate woman,
the desperate man
—never to be finished, still unbegun work of repair—it cannot be done without them
and where are they now?

on the street in cafes in basements
on threadbare mattresses writhing for freedom from a dark blue-eyed
lover in a secret attic. Such sickness is not cured by oration by poets
no human work can reach into the heart of this disease.
We free ourselves simply by letting ourselves be free.
No one said it was supposed to be easy.

— — —

i wonder how far our incredible, abundant geography influences our perceptions of reality. i have a hard time conceiving of poverty. canada is a nation of such incredible natural wealth that i almost always assume that everybody must be wealthy, that somehow, it must carry over to the spirit. denial is my instinctive response to the issue of poverty—both physical and spiritual—and i think i am not alone in that reaction. i also think this is a state that may be shared by americans. but a change is coming—some highly populated areas face severe water shortages, and fossil fuels have been an issue for as long as i can remember. what is the connection between having all one's material desires met and the state of one's spirit?

✠✠✠

i keep a close eye on the cloud, the lightning…

but i don't rush, there's no need for panic…

and the wind is getting stronger, gusting, less predictable…

i have to concentrate…can't lift the paddle too high…

have to be careful about how i shift my weight… i am balanced

i have never accidentally tipped my canoe… but the black clouds,

so low…the thunder bursting and breaking… the wind circling like a shark…

i am working, working hard to hold my course.

i feel a thrill of fear. allow myself one brief glance at the black water…

✠✠✠

i have to wonder how much of my personal identity is wrapped up in my canadianness. there's the myth of the "great white north." the implications—clean air, vigorous living environment, strong community to meet difficult challenges. in the days of confederation it was thought that only nordic europeans could ever thrive here, and that the conditions would make a new and better "breed" of people. despite the evidence to the contrary, i don't think canadians have wholly given up on that.

i've never noticed that americans suffer from this terrible national identity crisis that seems to preoccupy the media in canada. maybe that's because the united states was born out of revolution, where canada was born out of evolution. in revolution everyone has to be sure about what, exactly, they're fighting for; the rhetoric of us/them has to be very clearly in place, and the us's only commit themselves when they know exactly what valuable things they are dying for. there is no parallel in canadian history.

V

Begin in the early 1400's long before much vaunted
Columbus came to discover Breton fishermen
catching cod off the grand banks landing on Labrador to salt
and dry and trade furs to return to Europe for
measles small pox influenza.

Explorers Cartier Cabot into the St. Lawrence Champlain
becomes governor of Quebec. Fur traders monopolize
Huron middlemen handling soft beaver pelts now currency
once on the backs of beavers chewing logs into dams
and rearing their young to become felt hats
Metal pots axe heads and for the Northwest Co.
guns and whisky traded for two- or three-year-old worn skins
both sides convinced they have the better bargain.

Traders Hearne from Fort Prince of Wales determined Mackenzie with his
silver service Franklin lost forever in an icy waste.
Here on the North Saskatchewan
or driving through Vermillion on the way to Lloydminster their footprints
on the wild plain are covered by canola and wheat yellow
and golden in the august sun

Why are we here?
What is a nation?
The country we call Canada is two nations that occupy
the same space at the same time. Cree Chipewyan Micmac Dogrib
Slavey Iroquois never recognized French or English sovereignty

In the country we call Canada the second nation is also two:
English with power money queens and the French
on a province-sized reserve unwilling to recognize British sovereignty.
We are united by our conflicting politics.

On Little Fishing Lake in Northern Saskatchewan

On Little Bear Lake in Northern Ontario the sun sets doubled
Fish break the surface spawn and disappear
A dirt road leads to a single lane highway and cities
like mushrooms sprout from the ground.
There are always roads to take.

— — —

Adrienne is profoundly worried about the state of her country—about crime, pollution, the inability of modern urban life to provide sufficient nurture for the spirit and intellect.

She writes about the past because the past writes the myths of the present; she writes about the present because the present writes the myths of the future. These myths: the unfulfilled promises of a better life, of political freedom. Western society promises to the rest of the world: you will have more goods — more clothes, more food, more money — and they will make you happier than you have ever been before. Adrienne, as I, questions this promise. It seems to me the fine print is left out. No one mentions that the price for all this happiness is that you must give up who you were.

It's true enough that there is relative cultural stability in North America. Ordinary folks are not generally shot because of their political commitments (although the occasional president gets his)—this is the myth of political freedom. At least the propaganda tells us it's freedom; so do the politicians — but they have a stake in our believing that. Perhaps it's a matter of definitions. To me, we would truly be free politically if we were empowered to both knowledge and opportunity to govern ourselves, if government were truly accountable to the people.
Adrienne writes "Slaves — you would not be that." She doesn't say "unless you're black" or "unless you're a woman" or any of the other "unless you're"'s but I think the implication is clear. Although nobody ever has to be a slave, the so-called democratic political system is set up to make slavery easy—slavery of the spirit and intellect that is constantly excoriated by circumstances.

i lean back, pull the paddle out of the water…

thick drops of rain fall–first a few at time, then buckets, then a sheet…

my hair is plastered to my head.

i'm still a good three-quarters of a mile from the shore

but the water here is shallower… weeds cling to my paddle.

i lean to the right, unhooking the blade.

a gust catches the bow. spins it around.

i try to compensate. lean too far left…

careen windmilling into the waves.

VI

catch if you can your country's moment
watch if you can your country's glory through a glass border
on CNN ABC NBC

Well fed and white clean cut and dark
Patrick Buchanan stands with George Bush
for the american family
against abortion under any circumstances (anti-family)
against legal rights for gay couples (not real families)
against fags in the military (while we're on the subject of fags)
against silly environmentalists who put the lives of rats
over jobs for Americans (who, after all, need to support their families)
(at least while its still possible to have them)

Well fed and white greying and earnest
Jerry Falwell stands with George Bush
in favor of the super right

the Right the correct the true
America by the book (the bible)
(as read of course by the white male fundamentalist)
the rightest right of all.

Ronald Reagan is the most Liberal-minded person at the convention.
(scary, huh?)

mindless glazed over fanatic (FOUR MORE YEARS!)
white male christians and their silent wives (FOUR MORE YEARS!)
mesmerized by right (FOUR MORE YEARS!)
chant support for your own deaths (FOUR MORE YEARS!)
you eat meat three meals a day
and freedom is guaranteed by laws you elect yourself.

— — —

This is my first ever political poem. My political voice is unpracticed, not very polished. Sometimes, you have to say something whether your voice is polished or not. Sometimes things just need to be said. I find it ironic, however, that my first ever political poem is written about American politics. Perhaps this is because, even to a Canadian, American politics seems much more threatening than Canadian politics. I realize that I am perhaps affected by a certain amount of apathy, a conviction that "it could never happen here"—unless of course, "it" is forced on us.

I'm quite sure that your average American isn't generally too anxious about Canadian policy and government, although the American government has been on two occasions. The American military has mobilized to the Canadian border twice in our history as friendly neighbors: the second time was during the FLQ crisis when Pierre Trudeau invoked the War Measures Act, which is not really too surprising; but the first time was when the Social Credit Party formed its first provincial government in Saskatchewan. It seems absurd to me that anyone would be concerned that Saskatchewan might invade them, but I believe that the Socred government was perceived as a foothold for the "Communist Menace" that was attempting to take over the world

and undermine the American way of life.

This relates, I think, to one of the key differences between Canadian and American culture. In the US, one of the fundamental human rights as outlined in the Constitution is the right to bear arms. Canadians do not have this right, and I think that this is why Canadians invariably negotiate everything to death, rather than simply deliver a death blow.

✠✠✠

i write about politics, about republicans, about guns, yet my mind invariably comes back to the dream of water, which defines the canadian landscape and the canadian character perhaps as much as any other factor. if there is no ocean, no lake or no river, there is still the snow, the crystallized canadian dream eight months of the year.

✠✠✠

i hit the water hard…

slap my head against the paddle blade…

a little stunned i get a mouthful

of cold lake water, spit it out, gasp for one last

desperate breath.

i am wearing hiking boots, a down jacket, jeans, a sweater…

i sink like a stone.

but i still don't panic.

the jacket and boots, waterlogged, are the heaviest.

i relax my muscles… wiggle out of the jacket

the boots aren't laced… after a brief struggle i kick them off.

i occurs to me that i am naturally buoyant, and should have popped to the surface immediately upon removing the heavy clothes. a flash of lightning illuminates the underside of the waves less than a foot above my head. i kick strongly, but i don't move.

in the struggle to get out of my clothes i have become tangled in the weeds.

✠✠✠

VII

stars shine pointed white and clean
jewelled under the surface of Little Fishing Lake
a single strip of aurora ribbons through the reeds
reflected on a glassy black sky the moon
has not yet risen

a loon's cry breaks along silence the pier
rocks gently under our combined weight counterpoints
the wet gurgle of water on the almost-boundary sand.

— — —

i only love you for your car she announces
on the QE Toronto there's too much traffic
cars beside cars beside cars the highway is
sixteen lanes wide (not including collectors) the red 'vette
crawls behind a bmw behind a toyota behind
a pick up truck window wipers arching flicking the rain
the damp warm mist shadows everything
12 degrees C two days before Christmas

i know the route well despite the mist despite the dusk
and the glare of the headlights and the flare of the rear lights
and despite the wet suck of rubber on puddled black asphalt sending up
spray on the deep layered cut rock on the black loamy
soil damp with worms.

unheard outside the window there is always the lake
crashing grey and white against the edge of the city
ceaselessly cold deep moving
ending in salt at the far end of the St. Lawrence.

– – –

July 1st. Canada Day. Celebrate 125 years of Confederation.
Children with ice cream candy floss faces painted
clown-like men pushing strollers paying for hotdogs.
The edifice of government glowering down
teenage waders in bright cotton pants splashing
in the fountains out front.

On the high-level bridge they turn on the waterfall
water to water on the North Saskatchewan

– – –

In the arctic:

Here the interminable
ends: here
all things begin:
the river's farewell in the ice
the marriage of the air and the snow

in the endless cycle of water air cloud snow and rain
so our map is unified the dreamscape is not
routed through the land.

VIII

two little girls play house in the backyard
the yard is fenced gated they know better
than to play on the street.
one girl like a cabbage in a green coat
a little too warm with the zipper undone
too cold in august to take it off
hair dark and flyaway and small hands
grasping invisible rose-pattern teacups like her grandmother's
and issuing her mother's orders from soft sweet lips
spots of crystal orange juice decorating the corners.

one girl like a picture on the news
resolved in dots on the screen clearest from far away
of a child missing not quite clear
cheeks red dark eyes blurred shy smiling wet lips
is that a fish she holds or was that the boy on the poster

— — —

Sunday afternoon he drives his blue van around the city
turning corners stopping at red lights
slowing to allow old couples in clean dodges to merge into his lane.

His face is blurred through the glass he signals every lane change
comes to complete stops drives by children playing
in front of their houses

The house is familiar
the children in red and green have seen him before
(across the city as I approach the stairs that lead up to my apartment
a little girl in yellow leans against the stucco smiles shyly
says Are you coming to take me away?
If you take me away my daddy will come and kill you.

She doesn't know yet that daddies are as helpless as everybody else)

A mother peels carrots dirty orange skins
cling to her hands looks out the window
over the sink where she stands resenting dinner
the yard is empty the child is gone.

He thought there would be a limit and that it would stop him.
He depended on that.
But there wasn't and it didn't.

i am naturally buoyant. without the sodden jacket, the heavy boots…
with lungs full of air…
i have to fight to keep slack on my weed…
i have to untangle it… i don't have enough momentum to break it.

it's dark. eerie. i cannot hear the thunder…
the surface becomes enlightened
three dimensional the underside of waves, of white caps.

then darkness.

darkness and silence.

I have an idea for a poem, a moment I want to transform into an artwork. Some of the lines are in place—but the poem won't come. Perhaps the emotion is still too immediate. Adrienne's poem, while not one of her best, nevertheless reminds me of a person I know who is also alone.

The poem would open with my mother and me standing at the sink doing dishes. This picks up the mother at the sink in poem VIII—both have lost their daughter, but don't know it yet. To find my mother washing dishes is somewhat unusual—there is a maid and an electric dishwasher.

(a mother and her daughter do dishes
she, washing, tanned manicured hands in soapy water
diamonds glistening under bubbles
i, drying towel fountaining from my fingers
corner dragging dripping through the rinse water)

So we're standing there, gossiping, doing the dishes, when she says, "Do you remember Valerie Sawyer?" I raise one eyebrow, restrain the sarcastic answer that wants to erupt from between my lips. "mmm-hmmm", I mumble in response, trying to sound non-committal, and only succeeding in sounding like I have something to hide. She notices, of course, being a mother, but lets it go—one characteristic of my family is that we respect each other's privacy.

"I had lunch with her father." She gropes around the bottom of the sink, searching for the cutlery.

Now, him, I'm more than willing to talk about. "So, how is Uncle Shaun?" I may have over-done it; she eyes me suspiciously. Actually, he isn't really my uncle—he's my godfather. He always brought marvelous presents when I was a child, and has been a great favourite ever since.

"He's fine," my mother continues. "But Valerie isn't."

I'm beaten. My mother has decided to pursue this subject whether I encourage her or not. "The cancer again?" I ask. I can hardly keep the little thrill out of my voice. At age thirteen, when I first heard she had Hodgkin's disease, I'd been ecstatic, I'd known that god was on my side, and that bad people got what they deserved. I'd also been a little worried, because I knew that I was bad, too. But since I'd been bad against my will,I hoped that god would realize that the circumstances were extenuating and decline to punish me.

"Breast cancer this time." Mother barely whispers and I am reminded of Bill

Cosby's comment that people always whisper when they talk about cancer. "They had to take both breasts."

"And I suppose her hair is all falling out from the radiation treatments?" I say callously. I miss the pained expression on my mother's face because I am thinking about the past.

(delicate long-fingered hands
play sweetly on childing flesh
husky whispered shared secrets
of special friends and special times
teaching a girl child
things a woman needs to know)

I am remembering the pleasure and I am remembering the shame. It was relatively innocuous as sexual abuse goes—at least at first, but then she started bringing her boyfriend. I am remembering how it felt to kneel in front of him, his pants around his knees, my hands tied behind my back and her hands tangled in my hair, pulling my head back and my mouth open. I am remembering choking and gagging on his semen, with tears running down my face. And I am remembering her hands on my body and the sweet pleasure of the quivering, juvenile orgasm.

I am remembering my rage—my childhood stolen, my adolescence destroyed, my sexuality warped—I imprinted shame and pleasure in the same place, and came to a point where it was impossible to feel one without the other. I am remembering how hard it was to reprogram that warped sexuality, and the pain required to bring me to the point where I was willing to sacrifice the time and effort—it was no small undertaking.

So I want to write about her, Valerie, in my poem.

(the woman sits alone divorced on the couch
that matches the chair under the pictures
that pick up the stripe
keeping company with TV people who flicker
and move)

I want to write about how her breasts, her womb, her long, blond hair—those outward

symbols of womanhood—have all been seared away. Her husband has left her; she is childless, two thousand miles away from her sisters. Dying of cancer. Alone.

And I want to write about how the rage in me just doesn't burn any more the way it used to. Things aren't so black and white now as they were when I was thirteen. I was thinking about her a few weeks ago, and suddenly I remembered that we had been friends. She was only five years older than I, and we'd played together as children; I'd followed her everywhere, admired her, imitated her gestures, her clothes. So I got in my car, and drove to St. Albert where she now lives. We had coffee together. When she asked me how I was, I told her the truth, said what I had to say about what she had done. She cried, denied everything, begged for forgiveness. What could I do but give it? The woman is dying, for god's sake.

I don't expect I'll ever see her again, and I don't expect I'll want to. I have something new to get used to: this empty place inside of me where the hate and resentment used to be.

As I lie awake in my bed, warm, spooned, surrounded by the man I love, the space fills with joy that I am free at last. With equal measures of grief, I weep for her, lying under cold sheets, staring at the ceiling, waiting alone for death.

✠✠✠

pressure... pressure...

bursting... burst... burst out...

a bubble of air bursts between my lips...

clinging, clinging to consciousness...

clamp lips tight...

black and red blood rushing

i hear the blood rushing heart pounding

thunder bursting bursting bursting.

there is nothing in my dying mind but the desire to live...

one last desperate effort
i wrench my feet free lunge to the surface
my face breaks into air choke sobbing spit
a black wave slaps me in the face sputter
float. floating is so easy...

✠✠✠

i find that as i go along, i have less commentary to write—my mind moves further into the flow of the poems—i have less interest in analyzing even my own thought. i remain very uncomfortable with using poems as a critical discourse. i was not so frightened by using fiction—maybe because it at least looks like prose. at the same time i am elated, blissful, singing my songs to the poems and hearing the poems sing my songs back.

✠✠✠

X

Solitaire [adj]: lonely, secluded, desolate. **mener une vie solitaire**: to live a lonely life.

a lone woman mows the long grass on her front lawn
crossing and recrossing the motor roar drowns out her words
clippings shoot like bullets onto the paved sidewalk the last thing she cuts
is the motor the silence is so loud she reaches to cover her ears
turns the motion into a self conscious re–arrangement of hair disappears
into a too large garage for a single rake.

the august sky is so high so blue (like the colour around a cut that won't heal)
that summer can never end. To the northeast a few cottonclouds
will consider turning into thunderheads before the sun goes down.
She crosses and recrosses the yard raking grass into furrows

like farmers on the prairies she's never seen. the back of her hand
catches sweat on her forehead when she pauses. This is her first summer
of the grass that comes with loss.

Across the street and behind a high wire fence
deeply recessed far from the road behind acres of
professionally groomed grass grey and gabled like a stone farmhouse
cold in the summer sunshine

L'hotel de retablissement des drogues et d'alcool, where twelve
recovering addicts play volleyball behind the building. Inside
to the left of the reception desk empty cafeteria and meeting rooms
to the right the detox ward white walls sunlit
through high windows with thick glass

A solitary man strapped down screams his fear of reality pale blue eyes
bulge muscles strain no escape available at the moment from yellow elephants
sucking his brains out through their trunks.
A solitary young woman sits in the corner silent eyes
make jitterbug crossings and recrossings the unmade bed the curtains the pale
walls covered with inspirational posters in soft colours

A solitary native boy black hair clean to his shoulders weeps silently
shivers under heavy covers.

They have not met each other.

The significant feature of the desperate man reveals itself
when he meets other desperate men, directly or vicariously;
and he experiences his first kindness, someone to strain with him,
to strain to see him as he strains to see himself,
someone to understand, someone to accept the regard,
the love, that desperation forces into hiding.
These feelings that find no expression in desperate times
store themselves up in great abundance, ripen, strengthen,
and strain the walls of their repository to the utmost;

where the kindred spirit touches this wall it crumbles—
no one responds to kindness, no one is more sensitive to it
than the desperate man.

Outside, on the volleyball court in the yellow sun surrounded by
green grass someone scores a point. The team cheers.

✠✠✠

i see my paddle, float to it… my boat is gone. i cannot see it above the waves
after a long rest, floating on my back, rising and falling, i think about trying to
swim in–the water is no safe place to be during an electrical storm.
i take a deep breath, eggbeater strongly, let myself rotate,
locate the nearest shore.
i am not in particularly good physical condition.
under normal circumstances i would never be able to swim a mile.
i struggle against the wind, the current, but especially against the white caps slapping my face, filling every breath with water. i stop, float, rest. when i turn over on to my back rain fills my eyes. i lose distance, force myself to swim for longer periods between rests. i'm so tired i just want to die. but i don't. i keep swimming. i concentrate on keeping my head above the water. i concentrate on staying alive.

✠✠✠

XI

One January night in Bourlamaque the snow crunches under its own
weight like small bones
in the streetlights the clouds cover the moon
but the sky is like crystal each snowflake
alights disappears sinks through tonight as I walk
I am full of stars. A cat paces her teeth chattering disappears

around a ruined suburban fence.

Thirty miles away in Val D'Or the mines work all night
Gold trapped in rocks rides the long conveyor to the surface
Men stay below curled warm inside the earth
struggling against their need to be born into the ice
and dark of cloud. This deep tunnel is no true womb for men.

For one year in Bourlamaque outside Val D'Or
a doctor tends crushed limbs and bad backs lungs filled with dirt
even the mystique attached to gold was not enough to save
from despair these men who toiled underground in the dark
The metal's light must be renounced anew at the end of each day.

A small child born in Quebec knows nothing of patriotism
celebrates St. Jean Baptiste waves a blue flag quartered
with fleurs de lys laughs in the June sunshine and
follows the parade. The need for everything to be real comes later.

✠✠✠

XII

we met accidentally outside our doors
bright under new bulbs compared errands i to the mailbox
to post a letter to my cousin a letter full of envy love relief that i'm not her
on the occasion of the birth of her second daughter
you to put gas in your car go to the bank buy a pack of DuMaurier Extra Lights

somehow we ended up in this dark cafe
on bourbon street at west edmonton mall
eating by the dozen slimy raw oysters on the half shell
oozing tabasco black pepper and lemon
warm new orleans jazz shimmering on the walls
inhaling cool air through pursed lips after mouthfuls of spicy virgin caesars
trying to decide whether to order more oysters

or move on to mussels black shells steamed
open wet shining under flickering candle light
pink morsels with one blue eye curled inside
getting distracted by our conversation
and having to ask the waiter to come back four times before we make a decision
worrying about a mutual friend going through a bad time with her divorce
her husband is an addict too busy playing his mind games
to truly consider recovery and she letting him entering into his world
gossiping about the president of the board of directors
of the co-op where we live she's had a very interesting life
including three children with three different men
and a ten year old love affair with a rather highly placed elected official
who hasn't left his wife because it wouldn't look good to the voters
comparing jobs and the people we work for hashing out
some details of our trip to vancouver in the spring.

we never did talk about the night i took you to your first nar-anon meeting
where you discovered that other people's sickness can influence your own
or about the time we made tall snow angels beside
the squat childy ones on the ground along the stucco wall
then squealed at our icy cold bums when we insisted on playing on the swings
and frostbit our fingers we never did talk about
how you came to me when the man you loved left you
how i held your hand while you cried or how you
still loved me even after i relapsed though i came back even stronger
after you reminded me that all i had to do is keep my head above the water

we never did talk about your beauty which began to glow
as the light within you brightened
and is now so blinding i have to squint to see your skin

we decided to order mussels ate them with great relish gusto

and appetite as there were no men present
eventually went back through our respective doors
and went to bed feeling good.
there are some people you never have to say it to because they already know.
you're one of them.
(for V.)

✠✠✠

somewhere i have lost adrienne, lost an atlas of the the difficult world. *the book, the text has changed from a lens i see through into something different but related.*

my second bedroom serves as the office where i work. the man i love, aware of my fascination with metaphoric optics, supplied the room with a print of mc escher's hand with reflecting globe. the lithograph shows a minutely detailed man's hand holding a sphere of some reflective material. the man himself is reflected, as is the entire room in which he sits, all precisely distorted by the sphere.

adrienne's text has become like that sphere: it reflects back only myself. though i am changed, different, a new shape made from the old, i am still myself. completely and utterly myself.

✠✠✠

beyond pain...

beyond exhaustion...

i sink... wearily pull myself to the surface

sink... rest... swim...

my whole world is the next stroke the next breath

i sink... and

my foot touches rock

another step... two... my feet are on the ground

my head is above the water.

i hear splashing in front of me. six women run into the water, grasp my arms, pull me onto the shore. just out of reach of the waves i stumble onto my hands and knees, breathless, sobbing, tears and rain streaming and streaming down my face, vomit mouthful after mouthful of muddy lake water onto the pebbles. i start to shake violently, shivering with cold and nerves. one of the women scrapes my wet hair off my face, throws a blanket and a tarp around my shoulders, urges me to my feet.

they have a solid shelter there, alive with a fire, smelling of lemon oil and cloves. the warmth hits me like a slap across a hysterical face and i revive long enough to see them there, more than a dozen women, all shapes and sizes, all ages, some glittering with diamonds, others with broken nails and work roughened hands. all naked, soaked, hair indistinguishable except for length, plastered against their heads. all smiling. all glowing with a curious, bright beauty.

and i realize, though i have not written my thirteenth poem to answer adrienne's thirteen poems, though i have started commentary on a large number of issues, and have provided closure for none, i am finished writing about an atlas of a difficult world.

write as if you were dying, annie dillard wrote. i see now her phrase is only a clue, a sign post on the path to truer vision. i've learned something from adrienne, from knowing her, from constructing her, from admiring her work. my single most important message that must be written before i die.

i will write as though i am living. i have fought for it, driven myself toward it, hurt, endured for it, thrown myself into the fire — for life and the opportunity to live it for myself. everything else, politics, geography, countries in conflict are incidental. they may

help define who i am, but when i dive, like muskrat to find in the depths the essence of my own life, i go alone, and when i emerge from the water, i am reborn.

while i was dying, all that filled my mind was the desire to live.

✠✠✠

XIII (Dedications)

This work is dedicated to Barb,
Alice, Nola, Doreen K, Doreen S,
Jeanne, Maureen, Janie-Rae,
Norma, Donna and Lillian;
and to Vel, Joanne and Debbie
—the women on the shore.

Notes for "The Women on the Shore"

Italicized lines within poems are quoted from other sources as follows:

p79: *I don't want to think … to his own apparent devestation*, from from A. Rich, *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, poem I, lines 32- 35.

p86: *An autumn without … innocence long overdue*, from A. Rich, *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, poem III, lines 18-21.

p90: *Those needed for the meticulous … where are they now?* from *Atlas*, poem IV, lines 23-25.

p98: *Here the interminable … marriage of the air and the snow*, from Pablo Neruda, "Stones of Antarctica, 1961," quoted in R.Wiebe, *Playing Dead*, p6.

p103: *He thought there would be a limit …* from *Atlas*, poem VIII, lines 1-2.

pp108-9: *The significant feature of the desperate man …more sensitive to it than the desperate man.* from *Atlas*, poem X lines 25-40.

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